

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

19





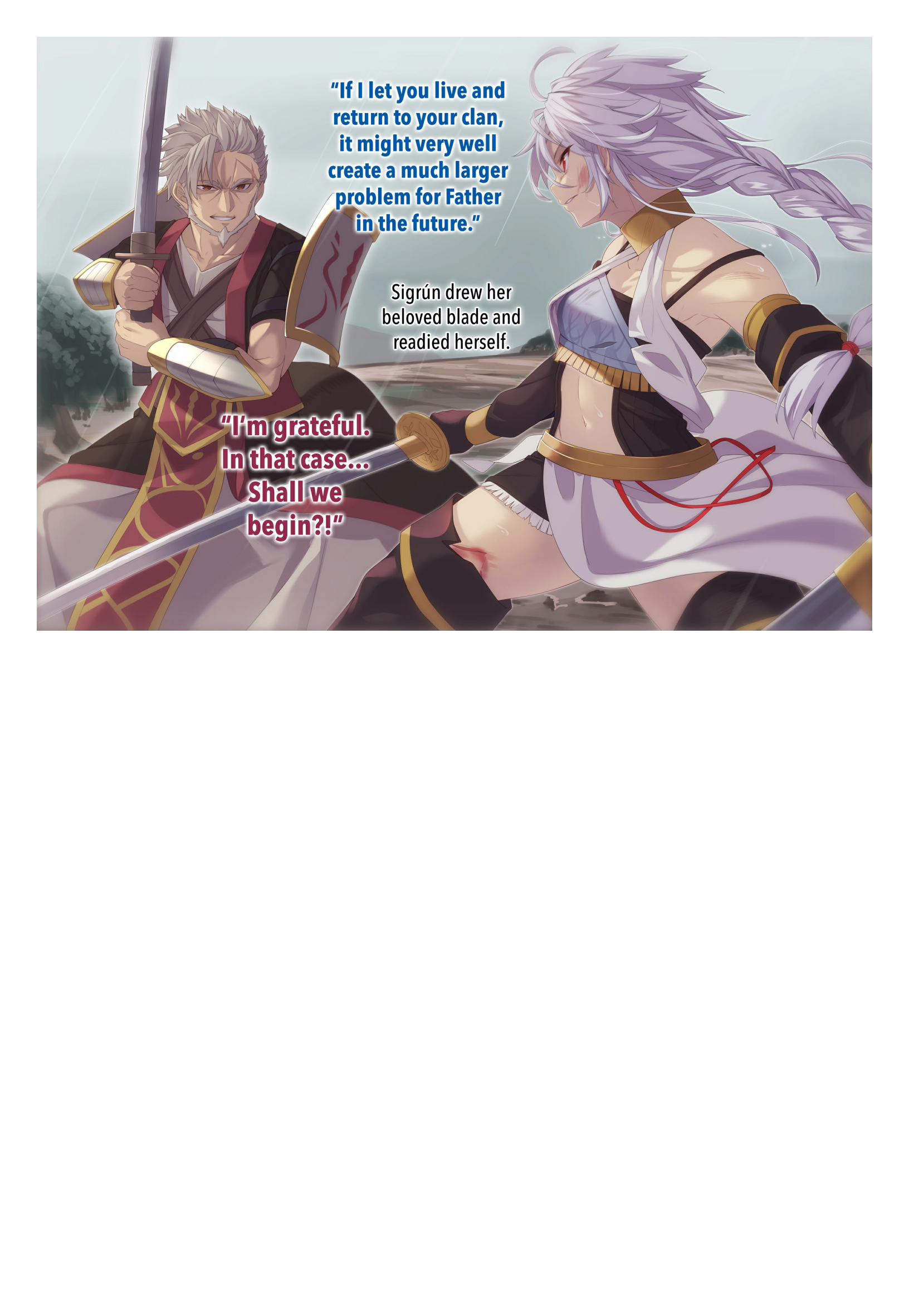


**"Sieg
Miss
Admiral!"**

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**"If I let you live and
return to your clan,
it might very well
create a much larger
problem for Father
in the future."**

Sigrún drew her
beloved blade and
readied herself.

**"I'm grateful.
In that case...
Shall we
begin?!"**



**"But it does
bring back
memories...
Hehe."**

Felicia gazed
off into the
distance,
chuckling as
she seemed to
be thinking
about the past.



c o n t e n t s

PROLOGUE

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

ACT 4

ACT 5

ACT 6

AFTERWORD

Characters

Felicia

Yuuto's adjutant, and sworn younger sister. She is an Einherjar with the all-purpose rune, Skirnir, the Expressionless Servant.

Sigrún

Yuuto's sworn daughter, a soldier and Einherjar of the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. She holds the title of Máhagarmr, given only to the Wolf Clan's strongest warrior.

Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. As the sovereign of his newly-created Steel Clan, he now rules over multiple subordinate clans as the reginarch, or "Great Lord."

Linnea

The patriarch of the Horn Clan and a talented administrator. She is currently Yuuto's sworn daughter and the second-in-command of the Steel Clan.

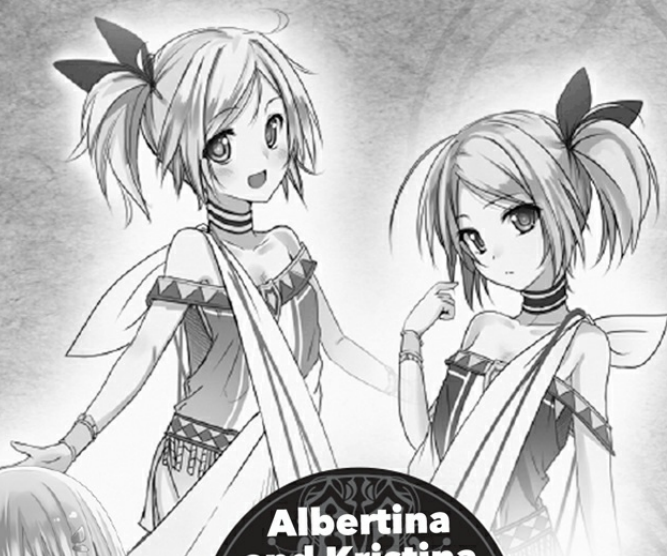
Ingrid

Yuuto's sworn daughter, and chief blacksmith of the workshop which produces weapons and other items for the Wolf Clan. She is an Einherjar with the rune Ivaldi, Birther of Blades.



Mitsuki Shimoya

Yuuto's soulmate and childhood friend. Committing to living her life with Yuuto, she became a resident of Yggdrasil through Felicia's summoning ritual.



Albertina and Kristina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan Patriarch. Kris and Al for short. Kristina lives to tease her care-free sister Albertina.



Sigdrífa

The 13th Reigning Divine Empress of the Holy Asgarror Empire. An Einherjar with twin runes, she also bears an uncanny resemblance to Mitsuki.



Hveðrungr

An Einherjar with the rune Alþjófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. Under the mask, he is Felicia's brother by birth, Loptr.



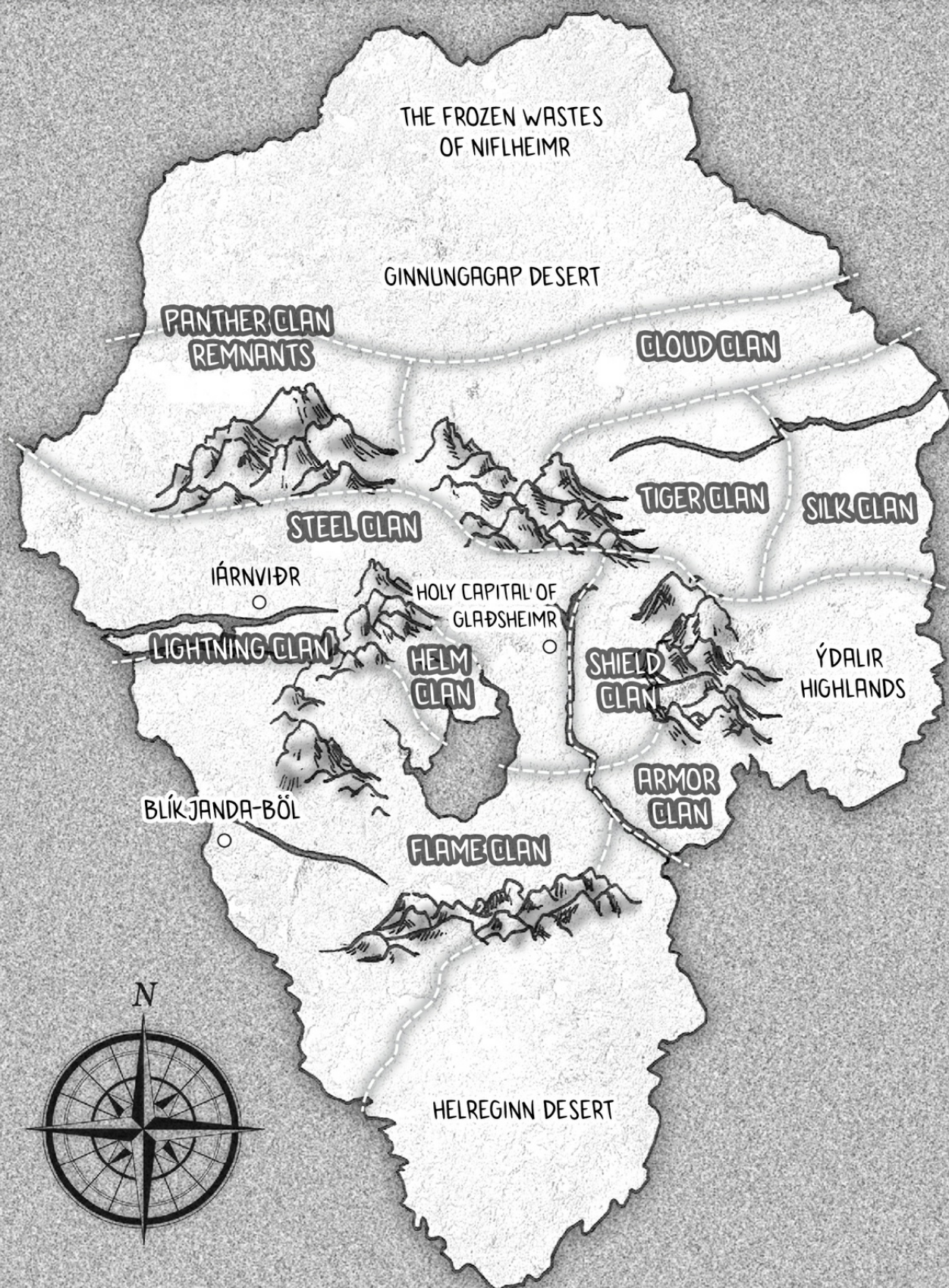
Oda Nobunaga

In Yggdrasil, he is patriarch of the Flame Clan, but everyone in Yuuto's modern world knows him as one of history's greatest figures—the legendary conqueror of Sengoku-era Japan.

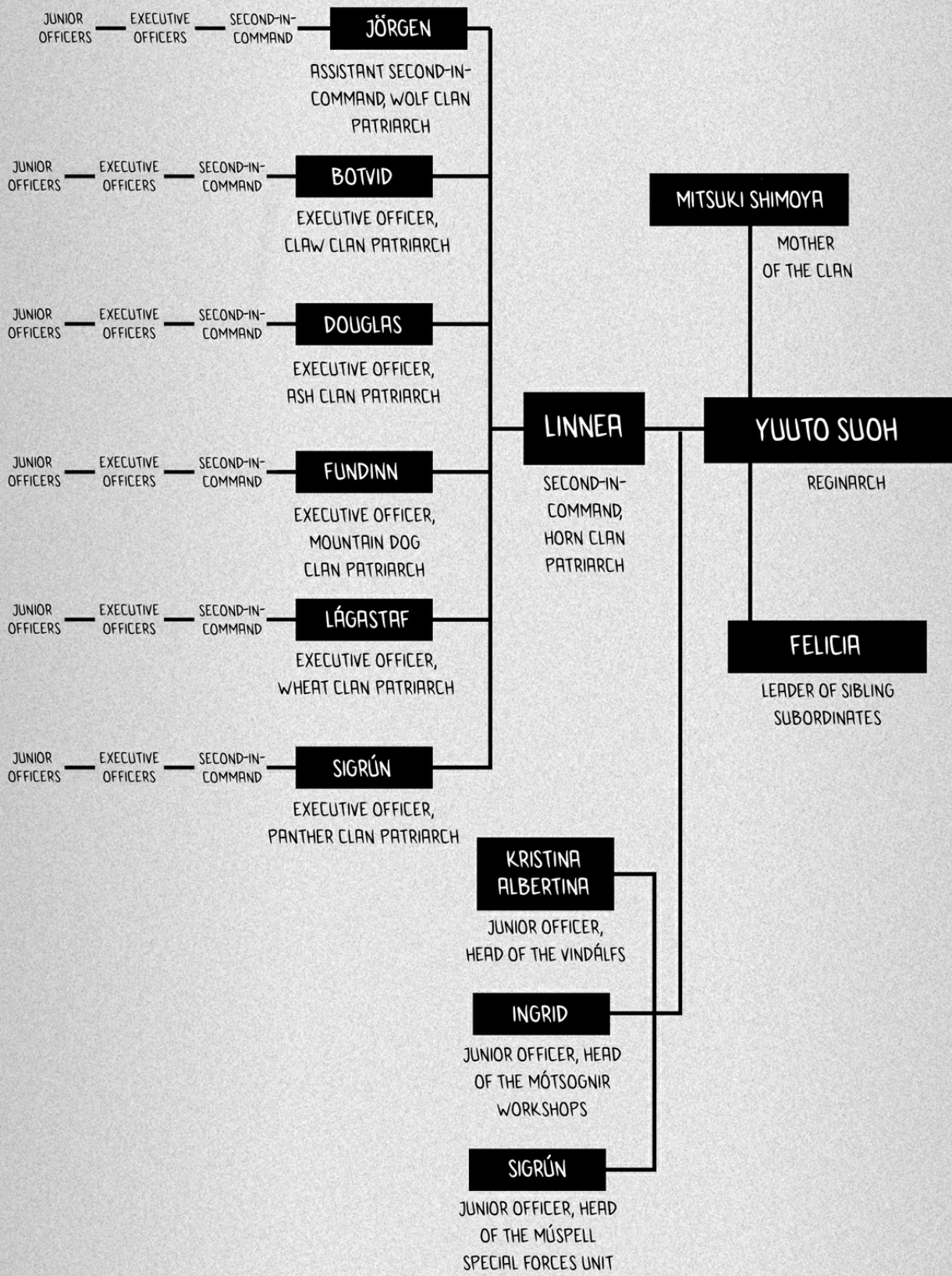


Fagrahvél

Patriarch of the Sword Clan who possesses the rune Gjallarhorn, the Call to War, and is Rifa's milk-sister.



HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN



PROLOGUE

“It would appear the quake is over,” Nobunaga said as he stood up and let out a sigh of relief. The great earthquake that had struck a year prior had itself been quite impressive, but this last one was far more intense. Were his territories, namely the capital of Blíkjanda-Böl, still intact? Earthquakes were especially dangerous in that they had the potential of causing further damage from secondary disasters such as tsunamis and fires. He couldn’t help but worry about the state of his realm. But before he pondered that too deeply, he called out to his most trusted retainer. “Ran, are you alive?!”

“Yes, I’m fine. Are you unharmed, My Great Lord?!”

“All good here. However, what’s most important right now is information. Find out everything you can about the damage inflicted by this quake.”

“Yes, My Lord!” Ran nodded then called over to a group of nearby soldiers and sent them off to gather information. Although he was dealing with a completely unexpected event, Ran’s expression remained calm, and there was no sign of panic in his voice; his orders were concise and unwavering. That extraordinary calmness was a big part of the reason he served as Nobunaga’s right-hand man.

For the moment, Nobunaga decided to leave Ran to handle the situation and pondered about what he would do next. Try as he might, he wasn’t able to shake the nagging concerns lingering in his mind about Yggdrasil sinking into the sea—the matter that Suoh Yuuto had informed him of at their first meeting.

“It seems that the lad’s prediction may well be coming to pass...”

He had been able to determine early on in their conversation that Suoh Yuuto was an honorable man, and that he had not lied to him. It was also clear that he was from further in the future than Nobunaga was. By all accounts, it appeared that Yuuto was right; Yggdrasil was going to sink into the sea. Of course, Nobunaga had already half-suspected that would be the case.

With that in mind, the most reasonable path would be to abandon this destructive war, cooperate with Suoh Yuuto, and plan the evacuation of the continent's entire populace. However, as he reached that point in his thought process, a sharp pain suddenly pierced his breast, and he coughed violently. The hand he had held up to his mouth was stained with blood. "Hrmph. Seems I'll be going to Valhalla sooner rather than later," Nobunaga muttered dryly and chuckled self-deprecatingly.

Two years ago, during the summer months, he had started to feel a pain in his chest, near his heart. He hadn't paid much attention to it at the time, but the symptoms had slowly, but steadily, gotten worse as the days had passed.

"Daddy! Are you okay?! Hold on, daddy, I'll heal you right now!" The girl who had come running to check on him suddenly went pale the moment she saw the blood, and she held her hands out to him. In an instant, Nobunaga felt a gentle warmth flow into his body, and the pain in his chest began to fade.

The girl who was currently healing him was none other than Homura. She was the one child born to Nobunaga since his arrival in Yggdrasil. She was also one of just three or four individuals in Yggdrasil who possessed twin runes—a trait that granted her extraordinary supernatural powers.

"I feel much better, Homura. Thank you, as always." Nobunaga curled the corners of his lips into a smile and gently patted his beloved daughter's head.

One of Homura's abilities was the power to control and strengthen living creatures. While her ability to control animals was limited to smaller creatures—things like birds, rodents, or insects—she *was* capable of strengthening humans, and currently, she was using that portion of her power to hold back Nobunaga's illness.

"You sure? Don't push yourself too hard, daddy." She beamed one of her usual smiles when Nobunaga praised her, but there was still a look of concern present. It was understandable, given that her beloved father was suffering from an illness. There was no way she wouldn't be worried. "Hey, daddy, why don't we go back home to Blíkjanda-Böl and rest a little? You can leave all the work to Ran, and I can cast seiðrs on you every day. If we do that, then..."

"You're such a thoughtful child, Homura. But that wouldn't matter in the

end...” Nobunaga understood his own body better than anyone else could. He was already over sixty years of age by now. At this point in his life, it was possible that he could die at any moment. Even with Homura’s twin-runed powers, the most she could do was slow his disease’s progression. The intervals between his coughing fits were steadily growing shorter, meaning that he was nearing the end of his natural life span.

Nobunaga pondered the issue in a very detached manner, almost as though he were dealing with someone else’s health issues. He had already watched numerous relatives and retainers die, ordered his subordinates to slay countless people, and had himself killed many people by his own hand. He had no illusions that he alone would somehow escape death.

“I will not choose to die quietly and peacefully! I would rather seek glory on the battlefield and do everything I can to become the conqueror I am destined to be!” Nobunaga shouted and gripped his hand into a tight fist. Given that he had been born into the world, he wanted to leave behind undeniable proof that he had lived. In his mind, if he left no legacy in his wake, then he might as well have never been born.

“Sniff... But, but...”

“Do not cry, Homura. The act of a child outliving their parents is a natural and normal thing. For a parent, knowing that they will be survived by their children is the greatest pleasure they can possibly experience.”

In this age of war, it was common for children to die before their parents. It also wasn’t unusual for parents to kill their own children to maintain power. On top of that, it wasn’t rare for illnesses to take the young and the weak. In fact, Nobunaga had already lost several children in his lifetime. The stark contrast of perhaps finally being able to experience the natural order of things left Nobunaga feeling unusually pleased.

“Sniff...”

That said, getting a girl barely ten years of age to accept that logic was another matter entirely, especially when considering how much Homura loved her father.

“Well then, let me dance for you, to help settle your feelings. Carve the

memory of me into your mind.” With that, Nobunaga took his fan from his sash and opened it. Soon after, he began to dance.



“A man’s life of fifty years under the sky is nothing compared to the age of this world. Life is but a fleeting dream, an illusion—is there anything that lasts forever?”

What he had recited was an excerpt from the Noh play *Atsumori*, and this passage, in particular, was one that Nobunaga had loved since his youth. He had often performed it at key moments throughout his life.

He particularly liked the view of life and death that *Atsumori* expressed. People die eventually. It is unavoidable. When viewed from the perspective of the heavens above, humans are fragile, fleeting creatures. However, that was exactly why Nobunaga wanted to live every moment to the fullest, so that he could leave the mortal world with no regrets.

“My Great Lord!” The moment he had finished his dance, a Flame Clan soldier dashed in looking for him. Though he was still young, he had the makings of a general, and Nobunaga had placed him in command of the front lines.

“What news do you bring?!”

“I bring word that the Steel Clan’s fortress has collapsed from the earthquake! Now is the time to attack!”

“Is that so?”

Nobunaga’s eyes shone with the predatory gleam of a falcon that had found its prey. He had been struggling to find a way to breach the fortress walls; the new province destroyers had done little damage to the all-but-impenetrable barrier that had, until now, been impeding his advance. To have gained an opportunity of this magnitude as a result of a completely unexpected event was something that even Nobunaga, with his uncanny ability to read the battlefield, could not have foreseen. That being said, it showed the true extent of his abilities as a general for him to be able to find opportunities born of coincidences like these and then proceed to exploit them to their fullest.

“Perhaps this is indeed the will of the heavens. Reminds me of Okehazama. Heh, it seems the gods above want me to conquer, after all.”

Nobunaga didn’t believe in the divine. At the very least, he was willing to state without hesitation that the gods pushed by religions—beings of vast

power that offered aid in exchange for prayers—simply didn't exist.

At the same time, there were moments when he felt there was a greater will that existed in the world. While Nobunaga believed that his conquests were due to his own abilities and efforts, he was also well aware that he had been blessed with a great deal of luck along the way. The rain at Okehazama, his sister's message at Kanegasaki, the sudden passing of his great enemy Takeda Shingen during the Encirclement—Nobunaga had found himself saved by numerous twists of fate. Had there been even the slightest change in his fortunes, Nobunaga would have long ago been reduced to another corpse on the battlefield. However, even when he was faced with his imminent death at Honno-ji, the supernatural had intervened; the heavens had chosen to save Nobunaga's life and had guided him to the land of Yggdrasil. With all that had happened, Nobunaga believed with a great amount of conviction that he had been sent by the heavens to the world of men to restore order, and that he had been born to become the conqueror of all that existed beneath the heavens.

“Send word to all forces. Prepare immediately for battle! We will begin an all-out assault at once. The heavens are on our side! We shall take this opportunity to destroy the Steel Clan!”

ACT 1

“Father! The Flame Clan has begun their preparations for battle! I believe they’ll be upon us within the hour!”

“Tch. That old man is so damned aggressive! Sheesh!” Yuuto’s expression twisted into a sour scowl as he listened to Kristina’s report.

Quickly identify the enemy’s weak links, and if an opportunity to leverage them presents itself, send all of one’s forces to thoroughly exploit those openings. These particular points made up the foundations of great generalship, but being able to make that sort of decision so quickly after a giant earthquake went beyond bravery and verged on insanity. A lesser leader would have been more concerned about his own territory and chosen to withdraw in the wake of such an event. Once again, Nobunaga had lived up to the nickname of the Great Fool of Owari.

Yuuto immediately came to his decision and issued his instructions. “We’re going to withdraw to the Holy Capital for now. We have no chance of winning in a direct battle as things stand.”

While the Flame Clan’s soldiers were probably just as unsettled as his own, it was clear that his soldiers had suffered a greater shock, given that the walls that had so effectively stopped the Flame Clan assault had collapsed before their very eyes. It was also worth remembering that the Flame Clan’s force was over three times larger than the Steel Clan Army group that had been defending the walls until now. He didn’t have any plans that would allow him to make up for that disparity, and he didn’t have time to think up or prepare any. That meant that the only option that remained was to run like the wind.

“I believe it is the correct call. Who will cover the retreat?” Kristina asked.

“Let’s see...” Yuuto’s expression clouded as he struggled with the question. The troops assigned to cover the retreat would be left at the very back to hold off the advancing enemies as the rest of the army retreated. It was an extremely important role, and it was considered one of the greatest honors that

could be afforded to a general, but that was in large part because it was extremely dangerous. For Yuuto, who valued the lives of his comrades, it was a difficult decision to make.

“Father, please give that role to me.” The person who stepped forward to volunteer was a strikingly handsome woman—Fagrahvél, the patriarch of the Sword Clan. “I swear that I will hold the Flame Clan attackers back until our troops can reach the Holy Capital,” Fagrahvél said calmly with a dignified air, despite the fact that she had just volunteered to undertake what was essentially a suicide mission. Her expression was that of a warrior that had steeled herself to her fate.

Yuuto placed his hand over his mouth and appeared to take a moment to think, avoiding an immediate answer. Certainly, she was well suited to the role. Maintaining the morale of the forces covering a retreat was difficult, given that they faced almost certain death. Many often broke ranks and fled in an attempt to save their own hides. Conveniently, Fagrahvél’s rune—Gjallarhorn, the Call to War—was capable of turning the rear guard’s soldiers into fearless berserkers, whether they liked it or not. No doubt the Flame Clan Army, expecting a broken and fleeing opponent, would be caught off guard by the desperate charge of a force of soldiers who were ready to embrace death. Such a force would almost certainly slow the Flame Clan Army’s pursuit.

However, even with that certainty, Yuuto found himself unable to make the decision. Though Fagrahvél was a relative newcomer to the Steel Clan, and he had only known her for a bit over a year, she was the milk sibling of Yuuto’s late wife, Sigrdrífa, and to Rífa, she had been a beloved sister and friend. On top of that, he had heard Fagrahvél had recently become close friends with his first wife, Mitsuki. He knew that it was selfish of him, particularly given that he had already ordered the deaths of many thousands of enemy soldiers, and sent countless of his own soldiers to their graves, but he still had a strong aversion to resigning someone close to him to that same fate.

Though he may not have liked it at that particular moment, Yuuto *was* the supreme leader of the Steel Clan. If he twiddled his thumbs and delayed his decision, that would place even more people in danger and could even cost them their lives. Regardless of what he actually wanted, he had to take

responsibility and make a decision. He gritted his teeth and slowly spoke. “Very well, then...”

“Hold it right there! Allow me to take that role.” A sharp voice interrupted Yuuto before he could finish. When he turned to face the speaker, the first thing he saw was the strange sight of a mask staring back at him.

“Bi...No, Hveðrungr.” Yuuto quickly stopped himself and managed to address the man by his current name. If it was revealed that Hveðrungr was actually Yuuto’s old sworn big brother Loptr, then it was highly likely that he would be swiftly executed for the grave sin of patricide. That particular secret had to be kept at all costs.

“Uncle, this is my role. Don’t presume to snatch it from me,” Fagrahvél replied coldly and glared sharply at Hveðrungr. Although she was still in her mid-twenties, Fagrahvél was a great leader who had risen to become the patriarch of a great clan like the Sword Clan and had been chosen to lead the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army. The aura she exuded was so powerful that it could overwhelm and frighten even the most hardened veterans.

“You should understand your place. This sort of job isn’t suited to a child like you who must carry the future of the clan. Something like this should be left to a lowly subordinate like myself.” Hveðrungr showed no sign of caving under Fagrahvél’s glare and instead retorted with a confident smile. His bravado was certainly reminiscent of the man who, if only for a short while, had led his clan to become one of the three largest in all of Yggdrasil. This show of his bravado was also reasonably impressive, by all accounts.

Most importantly of all though, he had logic on his side. As per the established hierarchical structures of Yggdrasil’s clan system, subordinates had no right to inherit their sworn parent’s title and, on top of that, were entirely uninvolved in the governing of a clan. In the event of Hveðrungr’s death, the damage to the Steel Clan as an organization would be substantially lighter than if Fagrahvél were to fall instead. That, of course, was completely ignoring the personal pain that Yuuto would suffer if either of them were to perish.

“Now is not the time to be talking about such things. My rune’s power is perfectly suited to covering a retreat. The lives of tens of thousands of our

soldiers are on the line. Please, leave this to me.” Fagrahvél, of course, wasn’t one to back down easily. While she was respectful toward him, given that Hveðrungr, as her uncle, was technically of higher status, her gaze made it absolutely clear that she considered him a nuisance and wanted him to butt out.

“I see. Do you intend to die, then?”

“If that is what must be done. If it’ll save the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers and save Father, the man Lady Rífa entrusted with the future, then my life is but a small price to pay.”

“Is that so? That’s all the more reason that we can’t leave this to you.” Hveðrungr snorted derisively as he dismissed her argument. Even the usually calm Fagrahvél found herself considerably irked by his response. It was understandable, given that he had just completely disregarded her intention to die in battle.

“That is going too far, even for an uncle! Are you mocking me?! Prepare to face me in a duel in that case!”

“That aggression is why I say you’re unsuited to the role. You’ve narrowed your perspective, and you can’t see the big picture.”

“What?!”

“By all means, with your ability, you can definitely stop the Flame Clan Army’s pursuit. But what will you do after that’s done?”

“After? That requires no explanation. I will kill as many enemies as I can for Father, the Steel Clan, and the people of Glaðsheimr that Lady Rífa loved so much. I will fight to my last breath.”

“Fool. That’s what I mean by not seeing the big picture.”

Once again, Hveðrungr made his scorn clear as he flatly dismissed Fagrahvél’s argument. Fagrahvél’s face turned crimson with anger.

“Grr! What is it that I’m not seeing, then?!”

“Let me repeat myself. What will you do after?” It seemed like his comment failed to resonate with her, and Fagrahvél furrowed her brow in frustration.

Hveðrungr shrugged his shoulders in exasperation, then continued. “Their goal is the Holy Capital and the unification of Yggdrasil. Even if you delayed their advance for a while, we would soon end up having to fight them again. However, if we had just recently suffered your loss, then it would be all but impossible to raise the morale among the Steel Clan’s soldiers.”

“Right...”

Fagrahvél seemed to have accepted some of the logic behind Hveðrungr’s words, and she placed her hand over her mouth in thought. Hveðrungr followed up with further arguments. “Your rune may very well be the power best suited to rebuild our army’s morale—perhaps even the only thing capable of doing it. If we lose you here, the Steel Clan will lose the opportunity to strike back.”

“...I see.” Fagrahvél nodded, though she appeared far from pleased.

It was true, the Steel Clan had suffered a major defeat. As Hveðrungr had argued, it would be difficult to motivate the Steel Clan Army when they eventually needed to strike back against the Flame Clan. But with Fagrahvél’s rune, Gjallarhorn, they would be able to, albeit temporarily, massively boost the army’s morale. If they could use that to score a victory—even a small one—then it would go a long way to rebuilding the army’s spirits. It was also worth mentioning that if they found themselves locked into a stalemate, Gjallarhorn could be used to tilt the odds in their favor. By thinking further ahead—considering the bigger picture, as Hveðrungr had put it—it became clear to Fagrahvél that losing the Rune of Kings would be an incalculable loss to the Steel Clan. No situation thus far was desperate enough to take that risk.

“I understand what you’re saying, but can you actually stop them? With respect, you currently have no soldiers of your own, do you, Uncle? It would be difficult to cover a retreat with borrowed men.”

It bore repeating that covering a retreat placed the soldiers responsible right into the grips of almost certain death. Of course, most of the soldiers involved wouldn’t want to die; they would much prefer to return home alive if at all possible. Because of that, the trust between soldier and commander was of paramount importance. The soldiers had to believe that the man or woman leading them was someone worth dying for. Until recently, Hveðrungr had led

an elite cavalry unit made up of horsemen who had been brought up on the harsh plains of Miðgarðr called the Independent Cavalry Regiment. However, it had been decimated after a flurry of tough battles, and the few who survived had been absorbed into Sigrún's Múspell Unit, leaving Hveðrungr with no soldiers under his direct command.

"Heh, not a problem. I'm not so reckless that I'd volunteer without some expectation of success." Hveðrungr curled his lips into a confident smirk. He was almost certainly one of the five sharpest minds in all of Yggdrasil. He had turned the tables on Yuuto several times with just his wits, even though Yuuto had access to weapons and tactics developed using knowledge that came from a time far beyond Yggdrasil's current era. Hearing Hveðrungr make such a bold claim, Yuuto was all but certain he would fulfill the task he had taken upon himself. If he had one concern, that would be...

"You're not planning to die yourself, are you?" Yuuto gazed intently into the eyes behind the mask. It was true that at one point he and Hveðrungr had been engaged in a bloody battle for supremacy. Hveðrungr had killed people dear to Yuuto such as Fárbauti and Olof. Yuuto would be lying if he said he held no resentment toward Hveðrungr for those things, but Yuuto himself had been the greatest reason that Hveðrungr had lost himself in his rage. To Yuuto, Hveðrungr was an important big brother who had helped him when he was still starting out, and he had so many things he wanted to talk to him about over a drink once things had settled down. More than anything though, he was the older blood brother of Felicia, who had done so much for Yuuto over the years. Despite everything, he certainly didn't want Hveðrungr to die.

"Oh, what a ridiculous thing to ask. Do I seem such a generous man that I'd die for someone like you?" Hveðrungr snorted and said with a derisive sneer. Yuuto couldn't help but blink in surprise as he heard that.

"Wait, Bi...Ahem, Hveðrungr. You're forgetting your place there," he replied, somewhat taken aback.

"Indeed. It's one thing to speak that way to us, but to do so to Father is going much too far," Felicia and Fagrahvél both said with a stern expression.

Yuuto was now the reginarch of the Steel Clan and þjóðann of the Holy

Ásgarðr Empire. He was someone who was to be respected and worshipped—someone all citizens of Yggdrasil were to bow down to and obey unconditionally. Hveðrungr was perhaps the only man in the entirety of the Steel Clan who was willing to speak so frankly and bluntly to Yuuto.

“Hah. I guess that’s fair. You wouldn’t die for me, would you? Heheh.”

Yuuto showed no sign of anger at Hveðrungr’s disrespect, and instead laughed in amusement. Yuuto held his titles only because he wanted to protect the people dear to him. He wasn’t in his position because he wanted to be admired or worshiped. He wasn’t bothered about something so trifling as respect; he was just happy to learn that Hveðrungr had no intention of marching off to his death.

“I’ve been on something of a losing streak lately. I’ve been looking for a chance to redeem myself, and I just so happened to find the perfect opportunity. That’s all,” Hveðrungr replied.

“Perfect, eh? Hah!” Yuuto couldn’t contain his laughter, and he slapped his knee. Hveðrungr had said it so casually, even though he would be facing Oda Nobunaga and his army of over one hundred thousand. However, that nonchalance was also why he inspired so much confidence.

“You may laugh if you wish, but what about on your end? I can buy you time to escape, but that’s the most I can do. Do you have a plan for defeating the Flame Clan Army when they advance upon the Holy Capital?”

It was Yuuto’s turn to answer questions. “It’d be best if we could just leave him an empty city, but, well...” Yuuto shrugged with a dry laugh. Yuuto’s ultimate goal was to simply move all of his people to the new land. There was nothing better than achieving that end without fighting.

“Likely not possible. In terms of timing, the people of Álfheimr haven’t gotten through Bifröst yet, I would think. Even if you could fully evacuate the Holy Capital before the Flame Clan Army reached it, they would have enough momentum to follow you all the way to Jötunheimr and cut you down,” Hveðrungr explained.

“...You’re right.” Yuuto frowned sourly and nodded. Hveðrungr was perhaps the best at identifying enemy weaknesses among the Steel Clan’s generals. He

was able to precisely point out the flaw in Yuuto's wishful thinking. Of course, there was a logistical problem involved in extending supply lines that far, but according to Kristina's investigations, the Flame Clan had a powerful Einherjar who could massively increase the Flame Clan's ability to produce food and gunpowder. Not only that, but the Holy Capital was almost entirely deserted, meaning that Nobunaga would face none of the difficulties often associated with ruling over a newly-conquered territory.

The emigration plan from Jötunheimr to Europe would take, at a minimum, another six months to a year. That meant that it was more than possible for the Flame Clan Army to finish the necessary preparations and march on Jötunheimr in an attempt to fully unify Yggdrasil. If that were to happen, and if the Steel Clan forces were forced to flee after a series of inevitable defeats, their morale would be at rock bottom, which would make any meaningful resistance difficult.

"We need to figure out some way to beat them..." Yuuto scratched at his head as he tried to come up with a way to deal with this rather bothersome problem. Honestly, he didn't really want to think about it. Since he had to, though, he had no choice but to suck it up and come up with a solution.

"Based on your expression, it seems as though you've got something special in mind."

"Well, yeah. I can't very well face off against that monster with just a single solution."

The idea Yuuto had come up with was to layer two or three different plans as contingencies. He had already anticipated the possibility of Nobunaga breaking through the Gjallarbrú Fortress, and he had set up a contingency plan. Of course, he hadn't expected it to be a giant earthquake that would end up taking down the fortress.

"I see. Then I'll go do my job and put my hopes in your next plan." Hveðrungr nodded his acceptance of Yuuto's explanation and turned to leave.

"Hold up, Brother," Yuuto called out to him to stop him from leaving. Hveðrungr tilted his head quizzically as Yuuto held out his fist to him. "Make sure you come home alive."

"Ah, that's right... We did this back then, didn't we?" Hveðrungr briefly

blinked his eyes before letting out a faintly sarcastic snort. He was referring to when he was still Loptr, Second of the Wolf Clan.

“Yeah, and you came home safely. It’s a ritual of sorts.”

“We were routed in that battle though.”

“That’s fine. We’ve already lost this battle, remember?”

“I might very well betray you after the battle.”

“Hah, I’ll give you a front-row seat to an amazing reversal that’ll rob you of any desire to do that.”

“Oh? That’s quite the claim you’re making. Then I’ll have to sit and watch. You’ve made a bold claim. If you fail, I’ll make sure to laugh at you.”

Hveðrungr’s lips twisted into a teasing smirk as he bumped his fist against Yuuto’s. As Felicia watched the pair, tears welled in her eyes.



Meanwhile, elsewhere on the continent...

Albertina sniffed at the air from atop the quarterdeck of the *Galleon*-class ship *Noah* before letting out a gleeful shout of triumph. "It's the wind from the city! It's almost time for fooodood!"

It had been nearly twenty days since they had set out from the port city of Njorðr on the western edge of Yggdrasil with the civilian population of the Panther Clan aboard. Over that entire journey, they hadn't stopped to resupply once. While Albertina liked being aboard the ship and thoroughly enjoyed the briny scent of the sea breeze, the food available to her there was generally preserved foodstuffs that had been stocked specifically with long-term storage for long voyages in mind. That was not to mention that rations were severely restricted for the duration of the voyage since they had nearly a thousand civilians on board who also needed feeding. Albertina was well known for her love of food, and she was longing to sit down and fill herself up with a big, proper meal.

"I still don't understand how you do it, Miss Admiral. I don't notice anything different 'bout it. So, what's different about the wind from the city?" The question came from the ship's captain. A hint of admiration could be noticed in his words. He was a rugged boulder of a man in his mid-thirties and looked much like one would expect a man of the sea to.

"Well, um... I can tell there's a whoooole lot of people there! The bustle and the smells of those people are all carried on the wind."

"Is that so? Sniff sniff... No, it still just smells like regular old sea air to me, ma'am."

One of the sailors nearby casually jumped into the conversation. "You really surprised? Miss Admiral's blessed by the goddess of the wind, after all." After a moment, he continued. "I mean, if I were a god, I'd definitely prefer our adorable little Miss Admiral over a greasy middle-aged man like you, Cap'n."

"Hah! 'Course!" The captain laughed off the sailor's remark with a loud guffaw.

Albertina was still in her mid-teens and was well known for her laid-back

demeanor. She both looked and acted younger than her actual age. However, she was also an Einherjar with the rune Hræsvelgr, Provoker of Winds. Because she possessed that particular rune, she was far more attuned to the wind than most people. That was a large contributing factor as to why she had been assigned to lead the shipping convoy that held the key to the Steel Clan's survival.

"Ahh, finally!" Ingrid said, appearing from the shade under the mizzenmast. While *Galleon*-class ships were incredibly large, a mere five of them weren't nearly enough to carry the hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people that needed to be evacuated from Yggdrasil. Ingrid and her shipwrights had been brought aboard so that they could work toward building as many new ships as they could once they reached the eastern region of the continent.

"I've missed the land more than I've missed the food." Ingrid sighed out the words with a worn expression. Given that they had been at sea for nearly twenty days, she had eventually overcome her seasickness, but even then, it was difficult for her to get used to the fact that the deck beneath her was in constant motion. Not only that, but she had been bored out of her mind. While she had tried to keep herself occupied with the games Yuuto had invented—which included things like playing cards, reversi, and chess—most of the people around her were seamen, blessed with more brawn than brains. They were hardly satisfying opponents to play against, and having quickly tired of trying to get a good game out of them, Ingrid had resorted to spending most of her days just staring out at the vast expanse of the ocean or napping in her hammock.

"Heh, seems that's the case for all of our guests below deck as well. Honestly, I was a bit worried they might riot. It's a relief to know we might safely reach our destination." The captain let out a sigh of relief, the fatigue visible on his features.

Currently, the people of the Panther Clan on board were living below deck, crammed together like sardines. While they were allowed up on deck for fresh air and exercise, even with that small reprieve, they were still reduced to living in the cramped confines of the holds most of the time. There had been a fair amount of grumbling coming from their ranks.

"I mean, I'm glad we told them this trip would take about a month, but if we'd

gone even a day beyond that, I reckon they'd have us hanging from the masts..." The captain said as he drew his thumb across his throat. While he was half-kidding, there was more than a little bit of genuine anxiety tinging his words. Ingrid had picked up on that, and she swallowed nervously in response.

"As soon as we get to port, I'll start mass-producing games to keep people occupied while they're aboard. It'll help a little bit, or so I hope..."

"Sounds good. We need to do *something*, that's for sure," the captain said with conviction. There were far more passengers aboard than sailors. Even the slightest possibility of a mutiny from them was more than enough to frighten the daylights out of the captain. He was elated at the prospect of having anything—even something as minor as board games—that could reduce the chances of that happening by even a whisker. "Guess we should let the guests down below know. You there. Head on down and tell our guests we're getting close to port," the captain instructed a nearby sailor.

"Aye, sir!"

"Wait!" Albertina stopped the sailor just as he was about to dash off below deck.

"Al?" Ingrid furrowed her brow as she looked in Albertina's direction. The Albertina that Ingrid knew was a constantly hungry girl who was always smiling. Her expression now, however, was far removed from the cheery one she usually wore. The current look on her face was one of great concern.

"Turn this ship around! We're heading back out to sea for a bit! Let the other ships know as well! Hurry!" Albertina quickly issued her instructions.

"Wh-What's going on?! What's wrong, Al?!" Ingrid asked with an expression of shock, but the sailors around her moved without pause.

"Roger that! You heard Miss Admiral, boys! Bring her about! Get the message to the other ships too!"

"Already on it!"

"C'mon lads! Haul in the fore main spanker!"

"Haul in the fore main spanker!"

The sailors shifted from their relaxed expressions to ones of tense readiness. They rapidly echoed the instructions they were given and made quick work of their tasks. Although they were heading back out to sea with the port close by, not a single one of them questioned their orders. If Albertina wanted them to hurry, they knew they had to move as quickly as possible. They knew the importance of doing so from their accumulated experience.

“Wow...” Ingrid could only let out a tone of admiration as she watched the well-oiled movements of the sailors on deck as they went about their duties. It was hard to believe they had only been serving as a crew for a little over six months. With the wind on their side, the convoy was able to quickly head out from the port and toward the open sea. Suddenly, the air was filled with the heavy rumble of waves approaching them from a distance. A surging wave caught the ship, causing it to bob up and down violently.

“Whoa!”

“That’s a big ’un.”

“First time I’ve ever felt her move like this.”

The sailors stared wide-eyed at the sea. The wave that had caught them steadily made its way toward the port. It quickly gained both size and force as it headed closer to the shore. The giant wave twisted and surged onward as it grew.

“I-It’s a tsunami!”

“I-It’s enormous.”

“Yeah, if we’d been swallowed by that, we would’ve been done for.”

Once again, the sailors could only manage to gawk as they made various comments. Their faces turned pale as the color drained from their features. For some of the sailors, they couldn’t stop their teeth chattering out of fear. If they had been even a few minutes late in turning around, the entire convoy would have been wiped out without a trace. With the adrenaline from having survived the tsunami still running in their veins, the sailors began to praise Albertina.

“Three cheers for Miss Admiral!”

“Damn right! She’s our goddess!”

“Sieg Miss Admiral! Sieg Miss Admiral!”

“Wh-What the heck...?” Ingrid stared in slack-jawed shock as the men chanted their almost religious devotion to Albertina. It made no sense to her, given that she had known Albertina before she had been appointed Admiral. If anything, she felt a bit creeped out about the whole thing. At any rate, Albertina and the convoy had somehow escaped unscathed, and the ironclad connection between the sailors and their worship of Albertina had grown stronger for it.

“Get a move on with those damage reports! Tell the supply units to bring bandages and distilled spirits for sterilization to each company. There’s also a very real possibility of aftershocks. Make certain you tell the troops to stay away from the river banks!”

To the west, near the Wolf Clan capital of lárnvíðr, Linnea was caught up dealing with the aftermath of the great earthquake. She quickly issued instructions to her subordinates.

“Impressive, Princess. You’ve handled this sudden disaster quickly, and with such grace. You’ve certainly grown.” Rasmus nodded in satisfaction as he stood off to the side and watched Linnea issuing her orders. It was originally believed that he had been slain during the Siege of Fort Gashina, but he had survived as one of Kuuga’s prisoners of war and had just returned to Linnea’s side.

“If that’s true, then it’s all thanks to you, Rasmus.”

“Pardon? All I did was watch over you.”

“Exactly. There’s nothing more reassuring than having you by my side,” Linnea, though looking somewhat tired, replied with a happy smile. Rasmus had been her teacher and greatest supporter since her birth, and he was effectively a second father to her. Having him at her side made the entire situation feel more bearable. Linnea was certain that she would have been in a greater panic if he hadn’t been here with her.

“Heh, such modesty. You’ve grown enough to no longer need me, Princess. As

proof, you fought back the army of Shiba, the Flame Clan's greatest general."

"Father was responsible for most of it. I wouldn't have been able to do it on my own." What Linnea had said to Rasmus wasn't born of modesty; it was exactly how she felt. The deciding factor in this most recent battle had been Yuuto's scheme—the insane plan that had brought about Kuuga's defection. It was precisely because Shiba had believed Kuuga was an ally that he had allowed Kuuga to place his forces on either side of his own army. Beset on all sides, even a general as great as Shiba had no way to wrest victory out of the jaws of defeat. To Linnea, that meant that the battle had been decided even before the first shots had been fired, and it was a battle that could've been won regardless of who had been in command.

"You're still excessively hard on yourself."

"You're the one who raised me to be this way. Besides, people don't change that significantly over just a handful of months. That's quite enough of that though..." Linnea waved her hand dismissively before she shifted her gaze to her left, furrowing her brow in concern. There was a wall of dirt that was around the height of three or four grown men. She then turned her gaze to her right. There she found a giant crevice in the ground that was large enough to swallow not just people, but even horses and cattle. Both of those features hadn't existed a mere half an hour ago. They were a graphic demonstration of the sheer intensity of the recent earthquake. She couldn't help but think about the damage that such a quake had wrought on the rest of the continent. "Is everyone okay?" she asked nervously.

"Rest assured, they're fine. Your instructions were quick and concise. I'm certain it was enough to keep the damage to a minimum."

"I can only hope." Linnea's expression remained troubled even after Rasmus offered her words of consolation. While she hoped that he was right, Linnea was also well aware that reality was often a harsh mistress, one who delighted in cruelly crushing such hopes on a whim. All she could do for the moment was grip her hands tightly into fists and wait. As the seconds and minutes seemed to drag on for an eternity, a red-haired girl on horseback came dashing over. While Linnea wasn't particularly close to her, she recognized the rider's face. If she recalled correctly, the girl on horseback was Hildegard, Sigrún's protégé.

“Second! Do you know what’s happened to Mother Rún?!” Hildegard asked immediately as she hopped off her horse, a tense expression dominating her features. Linnea felt her heart skip a beat.

“Mother Rún...? You mean Sigrún?” Linnea asked in return, doing her best to conceal her anxiety. A strong leader needed to always remain calm and show no sign of concern. Even the slightest sign of anxiety from those at the top quickly filtered down to the rank and file.

“Yes. She had gone off ahead to chase after Shiba, but she got swallowed by the overflowing river...”

“Ah!” Linnea sucked in a breath as she listened to Hildegard’s report. She felt the color draining from her cheeks. Sigrún was the greatest general in the Steel Clan, and she was the clan’s goddess of victory who had taken the heads of enemy generals when they most needed it. She ranked second only to Yuuto in terms of her importance to the morale and confidence of the common soldiers. If she was gone, it would be an incalculable loss to the Steel Clan’s strength. Linnea herself had known her for nearly four years and grown close to her, seeing her as a friend who shared her loving admiration of Yuuto. She was also aware that despite Sigrún’s reserved features, she had her adorable side. Could Sigrún have possibly...? Just thinking about that made Linnea’s teeth chatter and her knees wobble in fear. Unfortunately, though, bad news often came in waves.

“I bring a message!” A horseback soldier who appeared to be a messenger rushed in yelling. Linnea couldn’t shake the dread she felt at his arrival. “L-Lord Kuuga has died! He was swallowed by a crevice that had been opened by the quake, and when the river overflowed, he drowned in the flood!”

“Tch!”

Linnea felt a sharp pain squeeze at her chest. She couldn’t help but press her palm to it. Kuuga himself was, in the end, a defector—a general who had betrayed his master. While she felt gratitude toward him for saving Rasmus’s life, she had never even met him face to face. She knew it was heartless, but she didn’t feel much pain at learning of his death. The issue was that he had drowned. Try as she might to prevent it, she couldn’t stop herself from

imagining that the same fate might very well have befallen Sigrún.

“I see. Thank you for bringing that to our attention.” As Linnea stood in stunned silence, Rasmus thanked the messenger in her stead. That quickly brought Linnea back to her senses, and she bit down sharply on her lower lip. She still had some trouble dealing with unexpected developments like these.

“I can’t let this get to me! Worrying and mourning can come later. I’m the supreme commander here!” She harshly chided herself silently and raised her head. There was no longer any trace of confusion or uncertainty on her features.

“I shall be off, then,” the messenger stated as he turned to leave. Linnea stopped him as he did so. “Hold on a moment. Who’s currently commanding Lord Kuuga’s forces?” she asked.

“Lady Röskva, the current patriarch of the Lightning Clan, is doing so, My Lady,” the messenger responded.

“That’s the woman who served as Steinþórr’s Second, is it not?” Steinþórr had only ever been fascinated with battle. Linnea had heard that Röskva had essentially served as the Lightning Clan’s political leader, a role that the Dólgprasir was wholly uninterested in fulfilling. Her presence was a silver lining, given the circumstances. In the wake of this major natural disaster, what they needed most was someone like Röskva, rather than another cunning general. “Very well, then. We’ll send several supply units to them. Tell her to focus her attention on saving as many people as possible.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

“Hildegard!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Having suddenly been addressed, Hildegard straightened to attention.

“As far as Sigrún is concerned, we haven’t yet received any reports about her. We didn’t even know she’d been carried off by the flood.”

“Oh, I see...” Hildegard said softly in disappointment.

Linnea, however, continued calmly and confidently. “Remember this: she is

the Mánagarmr. A mere flood isn't enough to kill someone like her. She is the Steel Clan's greatest warrior. I'm certain she's alive."

"Y-You're right!"

"Of course. Still, she may very well be injured. You're to immediately head downstream to look for her. I'm told your nose and ears are exceptionally sharp. You are perfectly suited for this task."

"Th-That's a great point. I totally didn't think of that! I'm such a dummy! I should've sent someone else to report to headquarters!" Hildegard ruffled her own hair roughly—apparently, the thought had only just occurred to her. She must have been in quite a panic for that option to have slipped her mind until now.

It was unavoidable, in a way. Much like Linnea herself had experienced many times before, most people lost sight of the big picture and had their minds tend to go blank when they were suddenly exposed to life-threatening situations. However, people like Yuuto and Sigrún could make calm and collected decisions under such circumstances. They were quite unusual in that regard, and rather remarkable for it. "I-I'll go look for her!"

"Please do. I leave that task to you. We'll put together a search party and send them after you as soon as they're ready."

"Yes, ma'am!" With that answer, Hildegard quickly hopped back on her horse and rode off in a hurry.

As she watched Hildegard leave, Linnea gritted her teeth. She had meant it when she told Hildegard that Sigrún would have survived. After all, the battle against the Flame Clan was still raging in the Ásgarðr region. It wouldn't be possible to win it without Sigrún's strength. They couldn't afford for her to die before they'd completed their mission. More than anything though, Linnea didn't want to see Yuuto have to deal with the sudden loss of a loved one ever again.

"You better come home alive, Sigrún!"



“One danger leaves, and another takes its place.”

Sigrún drew the blade on her hip as she looked over the opponent in front of her. She had somehow managed to survive the flooding river water by grabbing a piece of driftwood, only to find a crimson war demon waiting for her on the shore, glaring at her with an enormous aura of hostile intent. That demon was none other than Shiba the Berserker General. He was the most famous of the Flame Clan Army’s generals, and he was also the single greatest warrior among the Flame Clan’s ranks. No, with the Dólgprásir’s death, Shiba was almost certainly the most powerful warrior in all of Yggdrasil.

“Perhaps I should run?”

As a warrior, Sigrún wanted to avenge her loss to him. But, at the same time, she felt that she was still far from his match in terms of skill. Sigrún, as the Steel Clan’s Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf, had the responsibility to lead and support the soldiers of the clan as they went into battle. That meant she needed to survive and return to the Steel Clan at all costs.

“...Still, that’ll be difficult.”

To her left was the Körmt River, while to her right was a crevice formed by the earthquake that had filled with water. That meant that even if she ran to her rear, she would find her path blocked. And, of course, standing before her was Shiba himself. She had nowhere to run.

“What is it? Are you, the mighty Mánagarmr, actually afraid? I suppose that’s understandable. You surely must have realized how much more powerful I was during our last encounter. You may run if you wish, Most Cowardly Little Mutt.” It seemed Shiba had seen Sigrún’s eyes flit from side to side. He laughed at Sigrún mockingly.

“Not a particularly good attempt at a taunt, I must say.” Sigrún snorted softly in derision. By her reckoning, Shiba appeared to prioritize his identity as an individual warrior over the fact that he was a general. She had gotten the same impression the last time they had fought. He probably felt this would be his last opportunity to go up against her one-on-one, and he was trying his best to goad her into fighting him.

“Heh, not quite good enough to have you fight me, I suppose?” Shiba replied.

“Certainly not, but I’ll fight you regardless. If I let you live and return to your clan, it might very well create a much larger problem for Father in the future.” Following that comment, Sigrún drew her beloved blade and readied herself.

Shiba was a man who had escaped a complete encirclement by virtue of his own individual fighting ability. It was obvious that if he returned to Nobunaga’s side and was given command of a division, he would be a serious threat to Yuuto. Not to mention, Sigrún had nowhere to run. As such, she dismissed the option of escape and instead focused on defeating him here and now.

“I’m grateful. In that case... Shall we begin?!” With a powerful shout, Shiba stepped forward. He brought his blade down, aiming at her neck. Sigrún blocked the blow and countered with a slash at his flank. However, Shiba jumped backward and easily avoided the attack.

“Yah!”

Sigrún lunged forward, as though to say it was her turn, and brought down her blade in an overhead slash. Shiba easily blocked the blow with his blade and immediately moved to counter it. Sigrún dodged the blow and unleashed a counter of her own.

“Something’s not right... What is it?!”

Even as they exchanged blows in this intense duel, Sigrún sensed something was off. Shiba’s movements felt slower than before. They continued to exchange several dozen more blows.

“He’s definitely slower than before...”

Last time, he had been superior to her in almost every aspect she could think of, and he had seemingly toyed with her during their battle. Now, however, they were fighting on equal terms. Some part of that was thanks to the sodden ground and the fact that his clothes were soaked through, but those same disadvantages were also applicable to Sigrún. Shiba wasn’t weaker; Sigrún had simply grown stronger since then.

“The tension is gone from your movements. They’re much smoother. Heheh, you’ve gotten much stronger in the three months since we last fought.” As

though to prove that point, Shiba chuckled in enjoyment as they exchanged blows.

Sigrún had some idea of the cause. It was very likely down to the fact that she had learned to relax—to let the tension out of her shoulders—when she had been buried in her own stress and panic during her recent struggles. Soon after she had learned to do so, she had managed to increase the sharpness of her movements, and she had been able to overwhelm Hildegard despite the girl's superior physical abilities. It was all thanks to her finally learning that it was okay for her to give herself a break.

“I have you to thank for that.” With that, Sigrún drew back her sword and turned to face Shiba sidelong.

“Mmph?!” Shiba, who had been pressing forward with his upper body, wobbled for the faintest of moments. Sigrún spun as she drew backward, and she aimed her elbow at Shiba's cheek. She had determined that if she attacked with her sword, the added delay would give Shiba sufficient time to respond. However, even with her faster movement, Shiba was able to twist his neck to avoid her elbow at the last moment.

After that, the pair began to exchange sword strikes once again. During that exchange, however, Sigrún avoided taking his strikes head-on. As much as she hated to admit it, Shiba was still the physically stronger warrior. For that reason, she made sure to simply deflect the force of his attacks. To do so, she was making use of what could possibly be considered the ultimate technique—the Willow Technique—that her master, Skáviðr, had instilled in her.

“Ah, so that's what it is...” Sigrún's lips curled into a faint smile. She had, of course, known about the technique and used it in the past. However, there was also a part of her that was fully aware that she wasn't able to make the best use of it. Although she could use it perfectly in practice or against opponents of inferior skill, she had almost never been able to make use of it in actual combat, particularly against more powerful opponents. At most, she had used it to surprise an opponent and create an opening. It was a far cry from the mastery of the technique that Skáviðr had displayed countless times.

But now, she fully understood the technique. At times, during a great storm,

the stoutest trees might snap and fall, but the simple blades of grass would hold fast by bending in the wind. The excess tension she had let build up in her body until just recently had robbed her of the flexibility needed to make use of the technique.

“Yaaah!”

“Nrrmph!”

The exchange of blows grew in intensity. Shiba’s battle techniques showed a reasonable amount of mastery thanks to his efforts to practice and improve them. As a result, she wasn’t able to take him off balance, but just being able to deflect his powerful blows was plenty good enough. If she had attempted to block them normally, her fingers would have quickly grown numb from the shocks. Like this, she was able to exchange blows with him on equal footing. No, if anything—

“I can beat him.”

Even in the midst of this battle, of fighting at the very limit of her skill, a certain confidence began to take root in Sigrún. It was only by the faintest of margins—a barely conceivable advantage—but Sigrún was on the offensive. She was well aware that it was too early to be making judgments like that, as they hadn’t yet entered the Realm of Godspeed. That said, if they were both making use of the benefits it granted, then the gap in their skill levels shouldn’t change. Right now, even the slightest misjudgment or delay in reaction would quickly flip the outcome in her opponent’s favor. She couldn’t let her guard down for even a moment. Despite that, she could see a path to victory. Given that she didn’t believe it possible to win at all in their last encounter, this was a remarkably impressive progression.

“Hyah!”

Sigrún let out a sharp shout and brought down her blade, but Shiba jumped backward to avoid her slash.

“I’ve pushed him back...!”

Shiba’s movement created a particularly opportune opening. Even if she could fight him on equal footing, Shiba was able to remain in the Realm of Godspeed

far longer than she could. Additionally, he may have mastered additional fighting skills that she wasn't yet aware of. While Sigrún had no problem with enjoying a sparring session, she wasn't such a battle junkie that she was interested in duels to the death.

"Yah!"

Sigrún was determined to finish things here. Her next attack was intended to bring the battle to an end. She lunged forward with a powerful thrust. She had timed it perfectly...

"Wha?!"

However, the tip of her blade had been completely blocked by Shiba's own. He had blocked her immensely precise thrust with the thin cross section of his blade. It was something he wouldn't have been able to do unless he had completely read Sigrún's attack.

"Heh. It definitely seems like you've gotten stronger. Really, though, is this it?"

The moment Shiba's lips twisted into a devious smirk, Sigrún felt a sudden chill run up her spine, and she hurriedly jumped backward. Sigrún's rune, Hati, Devourer of the Moon, made her extremely sensitive to dangerous situations. That rune was now sounding the loudest alarm bells she had ever experienced.

"You...were holding back?" Sigrún asked, her features furrowing into a scowl. For an opponent to hold back was the greatest insult that a warrior could incur in battle.

"I wasn't. Your last attack was, indeed, very impressive. Witnessing that blow, though, is exactly why I believe it'd be best for us both to fight with everything we have. Don't you agree?" Shiba tapped his feet against the ground. She immediately knew what he was referring to. They had left the river bank and were now on dry, firm ground.

"So, you drew me out this far, huh..." Sigrún growled with a bitter scowl on her face. One wrong step would have led to death. Despite that, he was able to pull off a trick like this. It was clear to Sigrún that there was still a massive difference in skill between the pair.

“Your body’s warmed up after that little dip you took, right? In that case, shall we begin our duel for real?” An immense fighting aura flared out of Shiba. The sheer intimidating presence that she felt was much more powerful than it had been earlier. It was as though he were signaling that he was now fighting at full strength.

“There’s this much of a gap between us still?! Can I even beat this monster...?”

Sigrún felt her conviction waver. She was sure she had begun to close the skill gap between them. However, it was precisely for that reason that she was more aware of the gulf that remained. She knew now that her ace in the hole wouldn’t work. There was no longer any path to victory for her.

ACT 2

“Big brother!”

As Hveðrungr was making his way back to his tent, a voice called out to him from behind. It was one he had known intimately since his childhood. What stuck out to him the most wasn't the fact that the voice was familiar, however. There was only one person in the world who would call him “big brother.”

“Hello, Big Sister Felicia. You seem to make this mistake quite often. As far as our Chalice oaths are concerned, you're my elder,” Hveðrungr replied, politely correcting her as he turned to face her with a smile.

Felicia furrowed her brow in annoyance. She was aware that he was teasing her. “I know full well. It was but a slip of the tongue.”

“A slip, you say? I've lost count of the number of times I've had to correct you.”

“Oh, come on! Big bro...Grrr!” Just as she was about to address him as big brother once again, Felicia caught herself and let out a muffled groan of annoyance. She had called him that for nearly twenty years; such a long-held habit was hard to break. Felicia couldn't help doing so. He was her biological older brother, so addressing him as such was a deeply ingrained behavior. It was difficult for her to change that.

“Heheh... So, what do you need? I'm in a bit of a hurry. I have a retreat to prepare for, after all.” If he truly was in a hurry, he probably shouldn't have wasted his precious time teasing her, but that playful streak was part of his personality—he had been born with an innate cynical and sarcastic streak.

“I'm well aware. That aside, I have a message from Big Brother, which I shall quote directly: ‘If it's necessary, I can lend you some soldiers. I may be overstepping, though.’”

“Oh, he certainly is.” Hveðrungr snorted with displeasure.

“Brother... Big Brother is simply concerned with your safety. You shouldn't...”

“I wouldn’t mind it from anyone else, but I won’t take that sort of help from him,” Hveðrungr replied curtly.

Hveðrungr had accepted his defeat and joined Yuuto as one of his subordinates, that much was true. However, that didn’t change the fact that Yuuto had once been his sworn younger brother, and though he would never admit it to his face, Hveðrungr believed that Yuuto was much better suited to be a ruler than he was. Of course, he had no intention of moping around in his defeats. Seeing his former younger brother worry about him was a stark reminder to him of just how far he had fallen—something he found distinctly unpalatable.

“What exactly are you going to do in terms of troops then? You’re not planning to try to stop an army of a hundred thousand by yourself, are you?” Felicia asked.

“The only person in all of Yggdrasil who even stood a chance of pulling off something like that was that twin-runed monster Steinþórr.”

Hveðrungr’s comment was wholly accurate. After all, Steinþórr had possessed both immense combat prowess and a level of recklessness that bordered on sheer insanity. While Hveðrungr was a skilled swordsman who had even competed for the title of Mánagarmr, he was well aware that his success as a warrior was owed to his cunning. As such, he wouldn’t have made such a bold claim in front of Yuuto and Fagrahvél if he lacked a realistic plan for success.

“Relax. I already have troops at my disposal. Skáviðr left a bunch of his elite subordinates in my care.”

“Huh? Lord Skáviðr did?” Felicia blinked in surprise.

He could tell quite easily what she was thinking. Skáviðr’s subordinates had almost all taken the Oath of the Chalice to Sigrún, his successor as Panther Clan patriarch. Although Hveðrungr had been Skáviðr’s predecessor as patriarch, Skáviðr had succeeded him without any sort of Chalice oath having been exchanged between the two of them. This meant that no hierarchical relationship existed that would have allowed Skáviðr to leave his valued subordinates in Hveðrungr’s care.

“These men aren’t his public subordinates. They are soldiers who serve a

more discreet purpose.”

“...I see.” Felicia nodded in understanding.

Power attracted all sorts of unsavory characters, and the resulting webs of intrigue were always complex. Such things meant that there were always dirty jobs that needed doing—unsavory tasks that no one in their right mind would want to undertake. Skáviðr had willingly taken those responsibilities upon himself from as early on as when Yuuto was still serving as the Wolf Clan’s patriarch. Thanks to his long tenure in his sordid role, Skáviðr had cultivated a sizable cell of subordinates who specialized in working in the shadows.

“It appears that they were instructed to come to me if something ever happened to him. Not that I’d ever been informed of anything like this,” Hveðrungr spat out rather sourly. It had caught him completely by surprise when Skáviðr’s operatives had appeared before him.

“He did so because he trusted you, big—err, Hveðrungr.”

“Hrmph. The vast majority of them are skulkers of the shadows with checkered pasts. Sigrún would never have been able to control them, so I just happened to be the one he fobbed them off to.”

Someone like Sigrún, who had always lived justly and righteously, would never be able to understand the motivations that drove those who lived less innocent lives. On top of that, back-alley deals and other dirty jobs didn’t fit Sigrún’s image whatsoever. She was one of the most public faces of the Steel Clan; for that sort of taint to attach itself to her in any manner would damage the reputation of the Steel Clan as a whole. Such tasks were things that she shouldn’t ever involve herself in. By contrast, Hveðrungr could empathize with those who carried old grudges and held dark secrets from his own personal experience, and he felt no hesitation with taking ruthless and coldhearted actions when necessary.

“Why must you be so cynical?” Felicia chided and furrowed her brow.

“It’s the truth,” Hveðrungr replied, flatly dismissing her critique.

“Oh for...”

“All that said, these men are the perfect kind of people to serve as my

underlings.”

As Felicia pouted at him, Hveðrungr curled his lips into a grin. He was well aware that this was a case of giving the right person the right job. Conveniently for him, it had also given him the opportunity to redeem himself. While his words indicated otherwise, he truly was grateful for his late mentor’s parting gift. Of course, given his personality, Hveðrungr still considered outright accepting that gift as a form of humiliation. He couldn’t bring himself to openly express his gratitude; all he could do was show it by producing results. To do that, he needed something special...

“I believe I mentioned that there was something I wanted readied—something far more important than soldiers.”

The thing he had requested was absolutely necessary for his plan to work. Without it, his entire scheme would be dead in the water. In his mind, making sure he got it was of the utmost importance.

“Of course. The fate of the Steel Clan depends on you covering our retreat. We’ll do what we can to supply you with what you need,” Felicia stated, firmly acknowledging his request.

As Yuuto’s adjutant, Felicia was greatly involved in the operational and management aspects of the Steel Clan Army. What Hveðrungr had requested was rather precious and rare, but given her insistence that he would be properly supplied, she seemed confident that she would be able to secure the amount Hveðrungr had requested.

“Wonderful. I’ll be off then,” Hveðrungr stated.

“Of course. Best of luck,” Felicia replied.

As he was making his exit, Hveðrungr noticed that something was slightly off about Felicia. There was something a little different about her. “Hah, so that’s what it is. I can’t very well die in this next battle then, can I?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Felicia tilted her head suspiciously as Hveðrungr suddenly broke out chuckling. It seemed that she had yet to notice. While Hveðrungr was neither omnipotent nor omniscient, he possessed almost unrivaled observational skills, and based on what he could deduce using those

skills, he was pretty certain that the changes he'd noticed in Felicia were because of *that*...

"Yah!"

"Raaah!"

Sigrún and Shiba's battle had grown more and more heated. To any onlookers, their duel would have looked like a swirling storm of sword swings. They were the greatest soldiers of their respective clans—two mighty powers whose patriarchs currently divided the rulership of the continent between them. The two warriors were closely matched in skill. The battle was practically a dead heat. However...

"Raagh!"

"Tch!"

Sigrún felt a sharp pain sting her cheek, and she furrowed her brow in response. She thought she had avoided the attack, but it appeared that she hadn't been entirely successful. It was only a minor nick; one that wouldn't affect her ability to fight. Still, it perfectly represented the gulf between the two of them.

"If things carry on like this, there's no way I can win," Sigrún murmured to herself.

She had clearly closed the gap in skill between herself and Shiba since their battle at the Flame Clan capital a few months prior. Last time, she had been overwhelmed and had been forced entirely on the defensive. In a stark contrast to that fight, in this bout, she had been able to keep pace with him. Sigrún was far stronger than she had been back then.

"This is still not enough... The gap between us is still much too big."

It might well have only been a tiny difference in relative terms, but at their current level, even the smallest disadvantages were extraordinarily difficult to reconcile. By all accounts, things were still fine. Sigrún still had plenty of motivation and energy left. However, being at a disadvantage sapped away one's morale, and as that morale continued to drain, it would increase the

strain on her physical endurance. It was clear to her that if nothing changed, she would eventually find herself in a rather terrible position.

“Heh... What’s wrong? Is this the best effort you can muster?” Shiba smiled confidently and flicked the blood off his sword with a snap of his wrist. He, too, understood the gap between the two of them in skill. “If you don’t want to die, you should hurry up and bring out whatever reserves you’ve got!”

Shiba once again went on the offensive, giving Sigrún no time to rest.

“Ugh!”

With no plan in mind as to how she could possibly win this battle, Sigrún deflected his downward slash. With her own wrist flick, she aimed a slash at Shiba’s face, but he avoided the strike by craning his head very slightly. The blow had been tantalizingly close to reaching its target, with perhaps a grain of wheat separating the tip of Sigrún’s blade from Shiba’s nose. Sigrún had even momentarily thought she had caught him. However, he had clearly read her attack.

“Hragh!”

With a powerful roar, Shiba brought down his sword against Sigrún. She hurriedly drew her sword back and took the blow with her blade. She felt the numbing impact of his strike run up her arms. He had taken advantage of her brief opening, and as a result, she hadn’t been able to properly deflect his attack.

“I’m not done just yet!”

Shiba quickly followed up with a horizontal sweep of his blade. Taking two of Shiba’s powerful blows in a block would put too much strain on her arms. She tried to strike back at him to deflect the incoming blow.

“Not good enough!” Shiba yelled tauntingly.

A split-second before their blades clashed, Shiba drew back with his sword and instead changed to an overhead slash.

“Mmph!”

Having been caught completely flat-footed, Sigrún’s response was slow. She

couldn't counter in time—she was about to die. The moment that thought crossed her mind, the color drained from her vision, and the movement of Shiba's blade began to slow. Of course, the blade itself hadn't actually slowed down, but rather, Sigrún's perception of time had slowed dramatically. She used her superhuman reflexes to turn her blade and managed to barely block Shiba's blade with her own. There was no stinging impact this time. Perhaps it was simply due to brute strength fueled by adrenaline, but when she was in this state, her strength increased substantially. That was probably what had kept the impact from jarring her grip. This was the Realm of Godspeed—the ace in the hole that had allowed Sigrún to slay countless powerful opponents in her previous battles.

“I see you've finally entered it,” Shiba said, laughing with glee. It seemed as though he had actually *wanted* her to reach this state. Being the kind of man he was, that assessment was probably true.

“*He actually forced me into doing it...*” Sigrún thought to herself as she gritted her teeth in frustration. She'd been dancing to Shiba's tune this entire time. It was an extremely dangerous situation to be in.

“In that case... I shall join you!” Shiba's movements began to accelerate. He, too, had entered the Realm of Godspeed.

Once again, the sound of their rapid exchange of sword blows echoed through the air. The superhuman speed of their duel meant that it sounded as though countless blades were clashing at once. Even if the Steel Clan Army's forces were to find them, there would have been no way for them to have intervened—the two fighters were simply moving far too quickly.

“Very good! However large Yggdrasil may be, you're the only one in this entire land who can fight me in this state!” Even in the midst of such an intense battle, Shiba's face was lit up with glee. In truth, Shiba was sincerely enjoying this battle.

The first time he had entered the Realm (the phenomenon Sigrún referred to as the Realm of Godspeed) had been ten years ago, way back when he had responded to Nobunaga's call to arms and defeated the previous patriarch of

the Flame Clan. Lævateinn, Nobunaga's predecessor as Flame Clan patriarch, was known by the title of the Sword King, and he had been widely recognized as the greatest warrior in Yggdrasil at that time. The reason Shiba had joined Nobunaga was not out of a desire to be on the winning side, but because he wished to fight the man who was known as the greatest warrior in Yggdrasil.

By all accounts, Lævateinn was remarkably strong—so strong that Shiba, who had already established a reputation as a powerful warrior despite his youth, was constantly on the defensive during their battle. It was during that very battle, with death staring him in the face, that he had first entered the Realm. He hadn't been able to forget the sensation of being in the Realm ever since, and after intense training, he had finally learned how to enter it at will five years ago.

He had mastered the art of battle. He still remembered the joy—the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction—he had felt at the time. At the same time, however, that had been the start of his descent into despair. No one remained who could put up a fight against him. Obviously, no warrior within the Flame Clan stood a chance against him, and even the most powerful Einherjar of the clans they had invaded weren't able to hold a candle to his skill either.

He'd never once had an opportunity to fight with everything he had—not a single time over the past five years. He had sorely hoped that the twin-runed monster Steinpórr, the former Lightning Clan patriarch—a man who was once known as the greatest warrior in Yggdrasil—would be the opponent he was searching for; a man against whom Shiba could unleash the full extent of his power and finally learn just how strong he was.

As fate would have it, however, that opportunity never arrived. Nobunaga had made the rational and correct decision to slay him using the Flame Clan's matchlocks. Had Shiba been slain by Steinpórr, the Flame Clan's morale would have collapsed, while the Lightning Clan Army's morale would have shot up. Of course, the Flame Clan would have won in the end, but Shiba's death would have made the conquest of the Lightning Clan much more difficult. Furthermore, it was easy to imagine that without the Flame Clan's most aggressive and offensively capable berserker general, their subsequent conquests would have taken substantially more time. It was entirely sensible for

Nobunaga to have done what he did to dispose of Steinþórr.

Nobunaga's guiding principle was to fight only once he had secured victory. He would never begin a battle in which he believed that he stood any chance of losing. He wasn't going to take such a dangerous gamble simply to satisfy one of his sworn children's desire for a fair fight. As a general—and as a ruler—Nobunaga had made the right choice, and Shiba had no intention of holding that fact against his liege lord. Still, it had been an extreme disappointment. Shiba had put in the effort to master the art of battle, only to lose the opportunity to ever make use of it.

“This was the way things were meant to play out, I suppose. The gods truly are heartless. I knew that full well, but still...”

He had resigned himself to his current fate. That was until he had met the silver-haired she-wolf that had stepped into the same Realm.

He could still remember the powerful emotions he had felt during his first battle in the Realm of Godspeed—the ever-present fear of his own demise and the tension that came along with it, and the joy of utilizing skills he had spent years perfecting. He couldn't remember anything that had made him happier. It was the most satisfying and most intense experience of his entire life. It affected him profoundly enough to make him regret that the battle had to eventually end—to cling to the prospect of actually not ending it.

It was in that very moment that she had exceeded even his expectations. She had fooled Shiba and escaped with her soldiers in tow. Of course, at the time, he had been enraged to have had his enjoyment brought to such a sudden end, but now he was glad it had happened. She now stood before him again, after all—and she was far stronger than before!

“Yaaaah!”

“Raaaah!”

Sigrún continued to deflect Shiba's full-powered blows. He had never fought anyone who had managed to survive so many of his blows while he was in the Realm. Even the strongest Einherjar he had gone up against were all left as corpses after a few exchanges, and yet, despite the fact that they had exchanged at least thirty sets of blows by this point, his opponent was still very

much alive.

“Heh... Sigrún, you really are quite something! More! Let me enjoy our battle in this Realm even further!” In the midst of their violent duel, Shiba let out a cry of pure joy. He felt his skills growing sharper with each attack.

Fighting wasn't something one did alone. It required an opponent. It was only by fighting an opponent of the same skill level—by getting used to their speed, and by making adjustments mid-battle—that he was able to refine his movements within the Realm. Nothing could make Shiba feel happier than he did at this moment. However...

“Grah!”

“Oomph!”

One of Shiba's more powerful blows finally managed to disarm Sigrún, whose blade was sent flying. She had been holding up against his assault to this point, but it appeared that she had finally succumbed to his superior brute strength. This seemed to be the limit of her ability.

“It's over!”

He at least wanted to end it painlessly for her and swept his blade down toward her torso.

“Guh!”

Unable to withstand the strength of Shiba's blow, Sigrún was thrown to the side and rolled across the ground. Despite Shiba's best attempts to finish her off, Sigrún's body was still intact.

“Still struggling, huh?” Shiba snorted.

Sigrún had partially unsheathed the other sword on her hip and had managed to just barely block Shiba's attack. However, she hadn't been properly braced, and as such, hadn't managed to block the entirety of the blow. No, that wasn't quite right, actually...

“Huff, huff...”

Sigrún picked up her main blade and used it to support herself as she stood up shakily. Had she let herself be thrown in that direction, or was it simply

coincidence? No, it was more likely just down to chance. Sigrún's face was drenched with sweat—she was gasping for air, her shoulders rising and falling as she struggled to control her breathing. It was clear she was near her breaking point, but even so...

“She hasn't given up just yet, it seems.” Shiba became even more cautious upon witnessing this sight. He took up his stance once again and faced his opponent, being sure to watch her closely. Shiba knew from experience: it was the wounded beast that was the most dangerous.

“Huff, huff... I knew as much already, but this guy is ridiculously strong,” Sigrún muttered to herself sourly as she readied her favored sword once more.

Given that their fighting styles were at complete opposite ends of the spectrum, the comparison she was about to make was a difficult one, but even so, Sigrún felt that Shiba was much stronger than Steinþórr. Of course, she also had to take into consideration how fitting each of the opponents had been to her fighting style.

In Steinþórr's case, he was someone who used his god-given gifts in his fighting. His power and speed far exceeded those of both Shiba and Sigrún even while in the Realm of Godspeed, but he enjoyed fighting and had a tendency to hold back to better enjoy his battles. He also fought in a rough, unrefined manner, and while that added an element of unpredictability, it also meant his movements were crude and lacked finesse. Sigrún had been able to just barely hold her own against him for those two reasons, despite the fact that he was far superior in terms of physical ability.

By contrast, Shiba was simply a superior version of Sigrún herself. He had more power, more speed, and was more skilled. Furthermore, he showed no trace of overconfidence or playfulness in his fighting, and he presented none of the openings that Steinþórr had given her.

“For Father's sake, I can't lose here!” Sigrún shouted as though to steel herself—to push herself forward. The memory of Yuuto's face and back as he had struggled with the grief of losing a loved one was seared in her mind. If she were to die here, Yuuto would blame himself and mourn her death. She

couldn't let that happen—there was no way she could let herself lose here. She needed to win at all costs.

“Relax, Sigrún.”

“Ah?!”

Suddenly hearing a familiar voice, Sigrún's eyes widened in surprise. It was a voice she should never have been able to hear ever again.

“Brother Ská?!”

She felt for his presence, but the only people around her were Shiba and herself. There was no one else here. Of course, that went without saying. Skáviðr had already departed for Valhalla at the Battle of Glaðsheimr, after all. Nonetheless, the voice continued to speak.

“You're like ice. Cold, hard, and sharp.”

“A heart of ice is necessary for a warrior, but ice alone cannot defeat your enemies. You may very well kill a man by sharpening it, but it cannot defeat steel. However, not even steel can cut water.”

“The clearest reflections come not from ice, but from water.”

“Learn to be as water, Sigrún. Only then will you become stronger than you are now.”

The words continued in quick succession. They were lessons that Skáviðr had repeatedly drilled into her during their training sessions.

“I'm told people reflect on their lives when near death... Perhaps this is something like that?”

As she stared death in the face, Sigrún's survival instincts must have been searching through her subconscious to find any hints that could help her survive this situation. “Be as water, you say...?”

At the time, she had no idea what he had meant, but when she had found herself at her lowest point after losing to Shiba and injuring her dominant hand, she had painfully learned the importance of relaxing in battle, and she now understood, at least partly, what Skáviðr had been trying to teach her. By shifting from the hardness of ice to the softness of water, Sigrún had found a

way to become just a bit stronger. If she hadn't done so, she would have been dead by now—slain early in this duel.

“There's still a step beyond?”

She had thought that mastering the Willow Technique had been the last thing she would need to learn from Skáviðr, but Skáviðr's teachings always held deeper lessons. Even when she believed she understood the initial lesson, she often found there was a second or even a third lesson beyond it to be learned. That said, if there was something more to be gleaned beyond that initial teaching, Sigrún couldn't see what that could possibly be, and she wasn't at all confident she'd conveniently find the answer during this battle.

“Everything's much clearer now. It seemed I'd gotten too tense again,” she stated in realization.

Having been overwhelmed by Shiba's raw strength, both her heart and body had tensed up once again. That tension had reduced her Willow Technique's effectiveness, and as a result, she had been unable to deflect Shiba's blows. It had also narrowed her perspective and made her movements more predictable.

“Still, finding some way to relax in this situation is easier said than done...”

Finding a way to relax both in mind and body when faced with the very real possibility of your imminent death was an impossibly difficult thing to do. She thought back upon Skáviðr's battle against Steinþórr with admiration; it was truly impressive that he had been able to maintain a state of such calm under the circumstances.

“Oh? It seems like you've thought of something. What sort of scheme have you come up with? You better show it to me quickly.” With his interest piqued, Shiba began to close the distance, step by step. While, by all appearances, he seemed to be casually stepping forward, there wasn't even the slightest of openings present in his movements. Despite the fact that their relative abilities had become clear, and he was a step away from victory, there wasn't a trace of overconfidence in any of Shiba's actions. He was a troublesome opponent indeed. She wasn't going to be able to hope for a mistake on his end.

“I have indeed. I suppose I may as well try it out.”

Sigrún released her right hand from her sword and held it only in her left hand.

“Mm?”

Shiba looked over at her with his brows knit in suspicion. Sigrún hadn't been able to withstand the strength of his blows even with both hands. Based on the battle so far, Sigrún was clearly right-handed. It seemed like utter madness for her to fight him using just her off-hand. In a sense, this had left the perfect opening for Shiba, but he was so surprised by her actions that he wasn't able to make a meaningful move. During that moment's hesitation, Sigrún drew the other sword that she had used to block Shiba's blow from earlier. It was the first sword that Yuuto had crafted, and it was a sword that had saved Sigrún's life on countless occasions. However, since it had been his first creation, it wasn't a particularly well crafted weapon, and as of late, Sigrún had started favoring the blade Ingrid had made, which better suited Sigrún's height and fighting style. Of course, Sigrún had always worn Yuuto's sword as a charm every time she went into battle. She held on tightly to that lucky charm—that sword that protected her—in her right hand.



“You’re dual-wielding, are you?” Shiba furrowed his brow, his expression conflicted. It was as though he wanted to hope, but couldn’t bring himself to fully commit to it. “Are you sure? If we clash, I won’t hold back at all. If you want to put it back, then now’s the time.”

Sigrún could easily read what Shiba was thinking. “Two swords are stronger than one” was the thinking of an amateur who knew nothing about swordsmanship. If it were true, the world would be full of dual-wielding swordsmen. But in reality, there were almost no dual-wielders. The reason was simple: almost all fighters had a dominant hand, and their off-hand was inferior in both strength and in dexterity.

Rather than swing a sword with that off-hand, using both hands to wield a single blade produced superior results both in terms of speed and in terms of power. And of course, Sigrún, as the most powerful warrior of the Steel Clan, was well aware of that fact.

“Not an issue. It’s true that I haven’t mastered the skill just yet, but I’m not making this choice out of desperation, and it’s not something I’ve just decided to try on a whim.”

She had first come up with the idea two years ago. Back then, she had switched from primarily using Yuuto’s blade to the one Ingrid had made her, and she had fought a battle to the death against her beloved wolf Hildólf’s mother. Perhaps it had been a strange twist of fate, but then, like now, she had survived by drawing Yuuto’s sword at the last moment. Since then, Sigrún had been trying to find a way to include Yuuto’s sword in her fighting form. While Ingrid’s sword was easier to handle, she desperately wished to continue using the blade crafted by the man she loved and admired. Of course, taking such feelings to the battlefield would only invite death. For that reason, though she had trained using this strange fighting style, she had kept it largely to herself, electing to fight all of her major battles until this point with just a single blade. However, given that her standard single-bladed techniques had no chance of working against Shiba, fighting with dual blades was now her only hope.

“Interesting. Show me what you’ve got! Don’t let me down, Sigrún!”

Shiba lunged forward with a roar, stepping firmly into Sigrún’s range. He, of

course, was greeted by a slash from Sigrún.

“Pointless!”

Shiba deflected the blade with an angry shout, his rage driven by disappointment. Sigrún was unable to match Shiba’s strength with both hands. There was no way that a swing using one arm—her off-hand at that—would stand a chance against him. Just as Shiba was about to go on the offensive...

“Ah?!”

Sigrún’s right-hand blade quickly followed the previous blow. He blocked it, only for the left to trail immediately in its wake. Faced with a constant barrage of sword strikes, Shiba was forced to focus on his defense.

Each slash wasn’t particularly heavy. In fact, they felt almost breezy and insubstantial. However, this proverbial breeze was made of sharpened steel. A steel blade didn’t need much power behind it to kill a person. Even a child’s strength would be enough to take down the mightiest warrior if the blade struck at that warrior’s heart. Shiba was just as vulnerable to this as any other warrior.

Of course, Sigrún was no child; she was an Einherjar. Even her one-handed blows were stronger than those of a two-handed swing from an ordinary soldier. Furthermore, each of her hands held within them a katana with a sharp, deadly edge. If Shiba took even a single one of those blows head-on, it could very well be enough to take off an arm or even his head.

“Yaah!”

“Graaah!”

As Sigrún continued to unleash her whirlwind of attacks, Shiba’s expression lost its composure for the first time during their battle, and he furrowed his brow in concentration. Sigrún continued to unleash her twin-bladed barrage from within the Realm of Godspeed. Even with Shiba’s skill, the attacks came at him with such regularity and ferocity that he was forced to focus entirely on blocking the blows.

“I see... She’s abandoned her defense and gone all-in on her assault.”

It was a fighting style she could only pull off if she had steeled herself for the possibility of her death and put everything on the line. The fact that her left hand wasn't her dominant hand meant the strikes from her left blade were slightly slower than her dominant hand's would be. That small detail was basically all that was keeping him alive right now.

"Hah! So this is it! This is my full potential!"

Even at what he believed was his full power, he still found himself being pushed to the very edge... It was the first time he'd felt this way in ten years. He was definitely in danger. He was being cornered by his opponent, and yet the only thing that Shiba felt was unbridled joy.

Yes, he was certainly struggling. It was difficult. He was frustrated. He was scared. Frightened, even. But this was what he had been searching for over the last ten years: an opponent he could fight with all his strength and yet not easily defeat. That was what was so great about this battle in his eyes. It was because he was fighting such a powerful opponent that he could take himself beyond his own perceived limits. He was finding a part of himself he'd never come across before. He had never been satisfied with his current self. Shiba had always sought out the next peak, the next step.

"Grmph!"

In the midst of the savage exchange, Shiba's cheek split open, and his blood spilled onto the ground. Until now, he had never been wounded while in the Realm since the very first time he had entered it.

"Hah!"

Regardless, Shiba showed no sign of fear. If anything, his expression was locked into a grin befitting the war demon he was. He then lunged forward with all his might.

He now regarded Sigrún as his equal. She was the one opponent he couldn't defeat unscathed. He needed to draw her as close as possible. The wound on his cheek was deep; it would leave a scar, but it was still his cheek. It had no impact on his fighting ability. And so, now that he had drawn her this close...

"Got you!"

He quickly took advantage of the smallest of openings to make his own attack. The most he was able to manage was a single blow. However, a single strike could very well be more than enough. A sword held in one hand stood no chance against one of Shiba's full strength attacks. Shiba unleashed a slash with all his might.

"Even two blades aren't enough to break through his defenses, it would seem..."

In the midst of her relentless assault on Shiba, Sigrún felt a prickle of anxiety.

Her decision to dual-wield had substantially increased the speed of her attacks. However, there were also many downsides to doing so. One of these was the fact that it was extraordinarily difficult to use the two blades in unison, as it required coordinating their strikes to complement one another rather than having each blade work independently. For the moment, the Realm of Godspeed's effect of slowing down her perception of time had helped her solve that problem.

Unfortunately, there was another issue that was substantially more dangerous: defense. It was impossible to block an attack from a stronger opponent using just one hand. While Sigrún had tried to come up with a method to deflect strikes one-handed through the use of the Willow Technique, she hadn't quite found the right solution yet. It was particularly difficult for her to pull such a thing off when she tried to use her left hand for defense. The Willow Technique required a nuanced understanding of both the user's and their opponent's strengths. However, because her left hand—her off-hand—lacked the dexterity of her right, Sigrún wasn't able to control it with the level of precision that was necessary to make dual-wielding a viable option for her. This was the greatest reason why Sigrún had steadfastly refused to use two blades in actual combat until now. In a sword fight, even a single blow was lethal. To face off against opponents like Shiba using such a fundamentally flawed fighting style would have been the height of recklessness.

"I need to settle things here or I'm finished."

While things were going well for the moment, if she was forced on the

defensive, the illusion of superiority she'd been maintaining through the battle so far would quickly crumble away. She needed to shatter her opponent's iron-clad defenses and bring this duel to an end before that could happen. However, as for whether things would go the way she had planned...

"I can't get through!"

Despite the fact that she was now moving faster than him, Sigrún was still unable to best Shiba.

"The gap between us is just..."

One thing that had become painfully clear to her in this duel was just how skilled Shiba was at reading and avoiding attacks. It felt as though he had grasped every aspect of her fighting style: her form, her physical abilities, and even the very paths that her blades would take. He was using that knowledge to read her attacks, and because of that, she wasn't able to take the last step needed to break through his defenses.

"At this rate... Tch!"

Although she still maintained her offensive advantage for the time being, her attacks were essentially a non-stop flurry of blows that left her no time to even breathe. It was extremely taxing on her body—especially so considering she was doing all of this while in the Realm of Godspeed. It was like punching a hole in a water cairn. She felt the strength rapidly draining from her body.

"Grmph!"

One of the attacks she unleashed in her anxious frenzy finally landed, splitting Shiba's cheek. Sigrún's joy was short-lived, however. Her rune, Hati, the Devourer of the Moon, was practically screaming at her in her mind. One of the abilities that her rune gave her was to detect approaching danger. Though he had been wounded, there was no sign of hesitation or fear in Shiba's eyes. His fighting spirit burned brightly in his gaze, and he stepped boldly forward.

"He's taking the wound so he can finish me!" Sigrún thought to herself worriedly.

He was a terrifying opponent. He had quickly realized that he wouldn't be able to avoid the strike, so instead, he moved just enough to avoid any fatal

damage and created an ideal opportunity to return the favor. Sigrún could do little else besides marvel at the impressive speed of his judgment and his ability to accurately read her attacks.

“Damn it!”

What came next was a diagonal slash aimed at her left side—yes, her left. It was a strike that had accounted for the weakness in her dual-wielding.

“He took the bait...!”

Sigrún focused her strength into her left hand and deflected Shiba’s attack.

Certainly, she still needed to refine her skill with the Willow Technique when using it with a weapon in her non-dominant hand, but because she knew where his attack would be focused, she was able to prepare for it and vastly increase her chance of success.

“I had faith that you would spot it!”

Faith in such an implacable enemy was an odd thing to have. While she didn’t know much about Shiba’s character, she was fully aware of his skill as a swordsman. She had essentially wagered her life on his combat experience allowing him to identify the weakness she had left open for him to exploit. As luck would have it, he had indeed done so. He let loose a powerful finishing blow aimed directly at her left flank, just as she had hoped.

“Rah!”

However, Shiba was a master of his craft. The moment he had noticed her using the Willow Technique, he immediately stopped his blade mid-swing, preventing her from taking him off balance. He had kept the possibility of her using the Willow Technique left-handed firmly in mind. He was a thoroughly troublesome opponent. Still, as impressive as his read had been, Shiba’s unplanned movement had forced him to tense for just a moment. For Sigrún, that was more than enough of an opening. The moment she had realized her left-handed deflection had worked, she had already unleashed a blow with her right blade. Everything she’d done until now had been for the sole purpose of allowing her to take advantage of this split-second opening he had been forced to leave her.

“Tch!”

Shiba leaped backward to avoid the attack, but Sigrún was faster. She felt the sensation of her blade cutting through flesh, and a fresh horizontal wound opened on Shiba’s face, spraying blood. Shiba grunted in pain. The moment she finished her swing, Sigrún collapsed to one knee and heaved her shoulders to draw in breath. Her lips were blue from a lack of oxygen. She was at the very edge of her limit, close to passing out from a lack of air. Even through that, she had felt her blow connect. It had all been worth it. Shiba was left doubled over, a pool of blood spreading beneath him.

“I managed it, somehow...” Sigrún muttered to herself, barely able to speak.

If she were being honest with herself, it was most likely that she’d have only successfully connected a hit onto Shiba in just a single try out of ten. This blow hadn’t been dumb luck, however. She had made use of a tactic Yuuto employed incredibly effectively—showing an opponent one’s weakness to lure them into a false sense of security.

Her long experience serving under Yuuto had borne fruit at this very moment. The injury she had sustained to her right hand during the campaign against the Silk Clan had, in the end, been a blessing in disguise. It had given her the necessary insight to truly master the Willow Technique, and more than anything, it had forced her to undergo intense training using her left hand—her off-hand.

She had also been graced with an exceptional sparring partner. Hildegard, who had fulfilled that role, was much stronger than Sigrún, at least in terms of raw physical ability. Thanks to her rigorous practice against Hildegard, she had learned a great deal. Sigrún’s last maneuver was, in essence, the sum result of all of her efforts and experiences up to that point.

“Heh. Heheheh.”

Despite taking Sigrún’s attack head-on, Shiba laughed as he stood up. His face was soaked red with blood, and he looked like some kind of mythical monster that feasted upon the flesh of people.

“Still alive, are you?” Sigrún said with a pained expression. She recalled the feeling of her blade cutting through his flesh, but it seemed that it hadn’t been

enough to dispatch him.

“Impressive, Sigrún. Even I thought I was finished for a moment there,” the crimson devil said with a predatory grin. He was bleeding profusely, and he had lost an eye, but he was still more than capable of fighting.

Sigrún, meanwhile, tried to force herself to stand, bracing herself with her sword, but her knees trembled, refusing to listen to her commands. She had a splitting headache, and the color had returned to the world she saw through her eyes. She was no longer in the Realm of Godspeed.

“It seems that last attack took what little energy you had left out of you.”

Shiba instantly sized up Sigrún’s current state. That wasn’t so much a result of Shiba’s sharp senses as a warrior, but rather due to the fact that Sigrún was visibly spent. The truth was that Sigrún’s body and mind were at their very limit. Her limbs were heavy from the effects of lingering in the Realm of Godspeed for such an extended period of time. The sheer exhaustion she felt made it difficult for her to focus her eyes. However, even as crippling fatigue clouded her mind, she knew; this was the worst possible situation that she could be in.

ACT 3

Sigrún somehow managed to get to her feet, using her beloved sword to brace herself. The world wobbled around her. More accurately, it wasn't the world that was wobbling, it was her own body. She was so exhausted that she was finding it difficult to even manage as much as standing upright. Her beloved sword that had previously felt as light as a feather now felt heavier than a war ax. It took all her strength just to lift it.

"Even despite your exhaustion, you still haven't given up. I'm impressed," Shiba said with a tone of admiration as he readied his own blade.

He was absolutely right; her spirit hadn't broken. Rationally, she knew she had no chance of winning, or rather, she would have been more aware of that if she wasn't utterly spent both physically and mentally. Sigrún was so run-down that a white fog had descended upon her mind, and she struggled to put together coherent thoughts. The only thing that kept her standing at this point was her determination to return to Yuuto alive.

"If you had been born a year earlier, you might have won today. You are quite the warrior, Sigrún! I will never forget you! Farewell!" Shiba announced confidently.

Sigrún could no longer even understand what he was saying. The only thing that she felt through her fading consciousness—the thing that shook her despite her mental fog—was the powerful and threatening aura that was radiating out from him. Sigrún felt her rune warning her of imminent mortal danger as a flash of light filled her vision. Sigrún quickly stepped back to avoid it. A heartbeat later, Shiba's sword flew past, the wind from the swing ruffling her bangs. It seemed he hadn't expected her to avoid the attack, and a faint tone of surprise was noticeable in his voice.

Once again, his threatening aura swelled, and she felt her brain fog ripple. At that same moment, she saw a flash of light dart across her vision. She wasn't able to fully avoid Shiba's oncoming swing, though she did somehow manage to

lift her blade, placing it in the way of the line. The high-pitched clang of metal hitting metal rang through the air, and Sigrún was thrown backward—or so it would have appeared to anyone watching the exchange. However, the actual combatants understood things differently. Sigrún had jumped. With her current arm and leg strength, she wouldn't have been able to block the attack. For that reason, she had decided to jump backward, following the flow of Shiba's incoming attack. This action allowed her to negate much of the power behind the swing. It wasn't a conscious action, but rather a reflexive one triggered by her instincts and years of training.

"Whoops." She somehow managed to land a slight distance away, but she stuttered in her step as her legs wobbled beneath her. Her body, completely exhausted, was refusing to obey her.

"Blast! You still had a trick up your sleeve?!"

Having seen her defend against two of his blows, Shiba looked on warily, concluding that it wasn't sheer luck that had allowed her to survive. Perhaps to Shiba's chagrin, however, Sigrún hadn't consciously used any techniques. She had felt the attacks approaching and had instinctively taken defensive action. That was all she had done.

"How entertaining! Block me if you can!" Shiba yelled gleefully. As he did so, silver light streaked in toward Sigrún from all directions. Not only were Shiba's blows fast, but they were well-coordinated, each one cleanly tying into the one before it. Though she may have been his enemy, Sigrún couldn't help but admire the artistry behind the attacks. Even so, Sigrún still managed to dodge the powerful flurry of strikes by a hair's breadth. As for the ones she couldn't fully avoid, she lightly placed her sword in the way. This offered the minimum necessary amount of protection for her to survive as she jumped in line with the blows.

"Huh? What is this? What's going on?"

With her attention focused solely on defense, Sigrún had slowly managed to catch her breath. The fog that enveloped her mind had started to clear. This only served to add to her confusion. She saw the trigger for each of Shiba's

attacks, and so moved in response to it. That was the simplest way to describe what she had been doing, but thinking about it revealed just how odd it was. The aforementioned trigger was the preparatory movement that happened before each attack was unleashed.

Past a certain level of mastery, it was too late to respond to an attack once the sword was in motion. For this reason, master swordsmen would instead use their accumulated experience to read an opponent's movements by watching their opponent's eyes, shoulders, and even their breathing. Sigrún, of course, was also doing exactly that. However, Shiba's movements were extremely refined and gave very little away.

Even with her skill, she had struggled to read his motions—he was just that good. While Shiba had easily read Sigrún's motions, Sigrún hadn't been able to reliably do the same to Shiba. The difference in their ability to read the others' movements had been the most significant factor in this battle. This was why, despite the fact that Sigrún was much faster than Shiba, she had been unable to best him in their exchanges. So why was she suddenly able to read his movements so clearly? It made no sense.

"Why?! Why can't I hit you?!" Shiba seemed to be at a loss as well. His confusion was understandable. Shiba, who was still in the Realm of Godspeed, currently held an overwhelming advantage in terms of speed. The fact that Sigrún was avoiding or blocking all of his attacks despite that made no sense to him.

"How strange... It's as though I'm trying to cut a fluttering leaf," Shiba grunted out, furrowing his brow. Doing such a thing was incredibly difficult, even for a skilled swordsman, because the air moved by their weapon would push the object out of the way of the oncoming blade. Because the object was so light, if the blade did manage to make contact with it, it would only end up being pushed away before it could be cut. Sigrún's current movements reminded him of something like that—of trying to cut at a leaf floating in the wind.

"I see. So this is what Brother Ská meant when he said to be as water."

Sigrún, too, had started to understand what had changed for her. She had melted the ice within her heart. That is, she had claimed back the emotions she

had discarded as unnecessary, and that allowed her to better see herself and those around her. Actually, it was probably not quite right to describe it as being able to “see.” It was more accurate to say that she was now able to “feel” the changes around her. She could feel the emotions of others flowing into her. It wasn’t a sensation that would make any sense to ordinary people, and no doubt there were many who would laugh it away as some kind of delusion. However, for those with a strong sense of empathy, and the particularly insightful, it was likely a rather familiar sensation. It was a type of empathic connection, one that she now shared with Shiba, her enemy. By essentially making her own mind into a mirror of water, she could reflect her opponent’s mind upon it. Taking inspiration from her other state of elevated consciousness, she decided to refer to this new mental space as the Realm of the Water Mirror.

“This is pointless. Very well, then. In appreciation for the enjoyment you’ve given me, I’ll show you my ultimate technique.” Shiba then returned to his standard stance. He appeared to accept that breaching Sigrún’s defenses would be difficult. Sigrún could tell quite clearly that he was focusing his mind. There was no mistaking it. He was about to unleash an attack much more powerful than anything he had wielded against her before now.

“Can I even stop it...?” Sigrún thought to herself as she swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. She had probably been able to reach the Realm of the Water Mirror because her mind had been clouded by a lack of oxygen. The fact that her consciousness and thoughts had faded into the background enabled her to pick up on her opponent’s intent. However, Sigrún’s mind was now clear, and she was fully aware of her surroundings. Unnecessary thoughts started to clutter her mind. Would she be able to return to the right state of mind?

“I can make it back there. Melt the ice and become as water...”

She began to set aside every emotion that could destabilize her mental state. It was an extremely difficult task for most people to pull off in the middle of a deadly situation like this one, but it was actually rather simple for Sigrún. After all, she had survived the horrors of countless battlefields and engaged in numerous life-or-death struggles with powerful opponents. However, the one emotion that remained was fear. It was an emotion that helped sharpen all five

of her senses. It was also a double-edged sword that could cause her body to tremble or tense.

“I’m scared... He’s clearly much stronger than I am. I’m afraid of losing; afraid of dying. More than anything though, I’m terrified that I’ll never get to see him again...”

She calmly accepted each of the fears she was currently feeling. When her heart had still been frozen, Sigrún had steadfastly refused to admit that she was afraid of anything. She believed it made her weak—that it would make her unable to fight. She now understood that wasn’t the answer. If she simply tried to put a lid on her emotions and hide them away, it would do nothing to change the fact that they were still lingering deep inside her. Even if she denied that they existed, there was a very real possibility that they would bubble up to the surface eventually. That had made Sigrún’s body tenser than it needed to be and robbed her of her potential. This time, however, she had faced her fears and admitted her weakness. She trembled in fear of all the things she stood to lose, then brought them to heel through the sheer strength of her will.

“I’m going to return home alive. I absolutely will make it back to him!”

Sigrún exhaled deeply and let the tension drain from her body. She kept her two swords held downward at her side. She wasn’t doing so because she was out of strength, but because this was the ideal form for her—the stance in which she could best fight in her relaxed state. While she had no way of knowing it, she was in the exact same stance that the great Miyamoto Musashi had taken in his self-portrait.

“Heh. This is reminding me of *that* battle,” Shiba said as he slowly closed the distance between the pair. He was probably referring to the showdown at the end of their encounter at the Flame Clan capital. Sigrún had waited in an iai stance while Shiba had slowly approached her to shatter her defense. While the pair were using different techniques this time around, the situation was similar.

“These will probably be the last words we’ll exchange in this life. Have you anything to say? I’ll pass your message on to the Steel Clan patriarch.”

“Certainly not. I’ll be the one to win here today.”

“Absurd. There is no doubt that I’ll win again.”

They finished their final conversation as the pair crossed over into the very edges of their respective ranges. The time for words between the two had passed. All that remained now was for them to speak with their blades. They faced off for several seconds—seconds that felt like an eternity.

“Ah!”

Sigrún suddenly felt a ripple surge across her water mirror, and she quickly jumped backward. This happened to coincide with Shiba’s body twitching ever so slightly as he began to move for his attack. The very next moment, four silver flashes pierced the place that Sigrún had been standing but a fraction of a second earlier.

“Wha?!” Shiba’s eyes went wide with surprise, as though he couldn’t believe what he had just witnessed. His attack had unleashed thrusts almost simultaneously in four places: his opponent’s forehead, both shoulders, and their chest. It was an attack worthy of being called an ultimate technique, one that was only possible with full mastery of the Realm of Godspeed. However, no matter how fast and skilled the attack, if the target knew when and where it was coming, even an unskilled opponent could avoid it. Sigrún had timed her leap backward perfectly, creating just enough distance to avoid the terrifying barrage of sword slashes. Had she moved even a moment sooner, Shiba would have picked up on her movements and stepped further into her range. It went without saying that an advancing fighter held an advantage over one who was in retreat. Had Shiba had any additional momentum behind him, Sigrún wouldn’t have been able to avoid his blows.

“Now’s my chance!”

Seeing an opportunity to claim victory, Sigrún stepped forward firmly and brought down her beloved sword at an angle. Even a swordsman of Shiba’s skill couldn’t help but create an opening in his defenses after unleashing four simultaneous thrusts. His response was slow, as though his body wasn’t listening to him.

As a fighter, Shiba was extremely skilled at adapting to his opponent. There was a good chance he’d quickly learn to account for Sigrún’s Realm of the Water Mirror. If she didn’t finish things now, she would stand no chance.

The blow Sigrún had placed all of her strength behind was deflected as Shiba slammed his elbow against the middle of her blade. While he had probably only done so because it was the only possible way he could have stopped the blow given his position, to try to deflect a sword blade with a bare limb was madness. It was a feat that was only possible through the combination of the benefits of the Realm of Godspeed, Shiba's vast combat experience, and an incredibly sharp fighting instinct. However, Sigrún had already accounted for Shiba trying something like this. Though she hadn't expected him to use his elbow to deflect the blow, she had been certain that Shiba was going to block her attack.

What Shiba hadn't expected, however, was that this first blow was meant as an opener. With a beastly roar, Sigrún attacked with her left blade—at Godspeed. When they had been staring each other down earlier, she had recovered some of her strength. This attack was her own ultimate technique—a strike that carried her full strength behind it. Despite that, Shiba was able to respond just well enough to attempt to block the attack with the superhuman reflexes granted to him by the Realm of Godspeed. However, Sigrún's sword passed straight through Shiba's defense and slashed open his body.

"Guh!"

With a dying scream, Shiba's body wavered as he staggered backward several steps, eventually collapsing to the ground. Sigrún, who had all but exhausted her strength, almost fell to her knees, but she stabbed her blade into the ground to keep herself upright.

"I need to follow through," she told herself. Sigrún's blade had cut open Shiba's right flank and landed a lethal blow, but it was entirely possible that he still had enough strength left for one final blow. The determination of a dying person to try to take down their opponent with them often defied explanation. She couldn't afford to let down her guard for even a moment until she had confirmed his death.

"Heheh..."

As she had feared, laughter spilled from the fallen Shiba's lips. Hearing the sound, Sigrún raised her guard even further, but he made no effort to stand, eventually letting go of the sword in his grasp. It seemed he no longer had any

will to fight.

“W-Well done to you, Sigrún. I couldn’t...follow your attack. Heh... I-I never imagined...there’d be something beyond Godspeed.”

“There isn’t. I just made it seem that way,” Sigrún replied bluntly.

“I see... A change of pace, huh...?” Shiba seemed to immediately grasp the mechanics behind her final technique. She had shown him a slow blow—at least by the standards of someone in the Realm of Godspeed—before unleashing a blow at Godspeed. Even Shiba’s sharp eye and superhuman awareness couldn’t keep up with the rapid change of pace. This kind of technique was common in professional baseball. A fastball thrown after a slower pitch often appeared anywhere from five to ten miles per hour faster than it actually was. Sigrún had taken advantage of that same mechanic.

“Regardless, you win this battle. It would seem that I’m done for. At least I lived my life as I had wanted. I was able to fight at full strength. I leave this world with no regrets.”

“I see...”

“Actually, that’s not quite true. I do have one regret. Can you tell me something before I head off to Valhalla?” Shiba asked, as though the question had suddenly come to mind.

“What is it?” Although they had fought a life-or-death duel, Sigrún didn’t actually dislike Shiba. If anything, Sigrún admired him for his strength—the very epitome of mastery achieved through training. She wanted to do what she could to let him depart from this plane at peace.

“My last move... I-I never showed it to you before. I had used the mirror the Great Lord had given me to erase any traces of its existence in my skill set.”

“It was quite remarkable. If I had been even the tiniest amount slower in dodging, I would have been the one lying on the ground dying.”

“H-How were you able to read that attack...? What tells did I let slip? I can’t die in peace unless I find out what I did wrong.” Although he would never be able to use the information, his last question was still about furthering his skill in combat. Even on his deathbed, Shiba was still the same man—a warrior who

wanted to do all he could to become the ultimate fighter.

“It was less that I saw it and more that I felt it.”

“You felt it? What exactly did you feel?” Shiba asked, sounding rather confused.

“I could vaguely feel that you were about to attack. I felt your intent.”

“Vaguely, eh? Hahah... I suppose that’s very much the kind of world we warriors live in.” Shiba laughed dryly, a faint note of frustration in his voice. Sigrún’s answer must have been painfully frustrating to him, given that it was so vague.

“Even so...” Sigrún interjected.

“Mm?”

“I think the reason I actually managed to pull that off was that I finally opened my heart and confronted my weaknesses head-on.”

“Hah... Hahahahaha! E-Even now, I’m haunted by that blasted concept! Bahahahahaha!” Shiba suddenly burst out into laughter. He couldn’t contain his amusement. Of course, such a strenuous act caused the wound in his torso to open further, and blood spurted from the gash, but he continued laughing nonetheless. Sigrún stared at him in astonishment, prompting Shiba to gesture for her to continue with his chin. “Heheh. K-Keep talking. I don’t have much time.”

“Very well. I had always been discarding my negative emotions. I felt my judgment would be impaired by them. As a warrior, I felt that I didn’t need such things.”

“I’m the same way.”

“But now I realize that bottling those emotions up had only served to dull my senses.”

“They dulled them?”

“Exactly. If you indiscriminately shut away your emotions, you’ll of course be less influenced by them, which makes it easier to make the right decisions. At the same time, however, I believe that doing such a thing robs you of your

ability to feel things.”

Even Sigrún had felt anxiety and fear in her first battle. At some point, though, she had stopped feeling such emotions. She felt no fear even when fighting Steinþórr, or when fighting the great wolf Garmr, nor did she when she first faced off against Shiba. Despite fighting against opponents substantially more powerful than she was, while Sigrún had felt a sense of danger, she hadn’t felt any fear.

Though pain and anxiety were bothersome to deal with, they were also necessary for living creatures to survive. They needed those feelings to allow them to comprehend danger. Sigrún’s rune Hati was extremely effective at detecting danger, providing insights such as identifying poisoned food. By bottling up her negative emotions until now, Sigrún had only ended up weakening herself.

“I see... So you were able to read my movements because you had allowed yourself to feel those things?”

“I think so.”

“I-I see. It seems that I might have...lost my sense of various...things...” His voice had grown so faint that his final words were incomprehensible. His wound had bled profusely. It was more surprising that he had been able to converse so lucidly for so long. That was probably made possible by his strong will—the same will that had allowed him to master the use of the Realm of Godspeed. However, as it seemed that he had received an acceptable answer to his question, he was now reaching the limit of his willpower.

“What a pity... To die...just as I found a way...to become even stronger...” Shiba reached his hand out toward the sun as though he were trying to grasp it. Of course, there was no way he could do so. His arm fell limply to the ground. It was over now—his life had ended. The expression upon his face was far from serene, and as if to epitomize the driving ambition that had controlled his life, he looked as though he was seeking some greater power even in death. However, it was precisely because he was that sort of man that he had reached the heights he had.

On Yggdrasil, it was typical to close a dead man’s eyes so that they might rest

in peace, but Sigrún chose not to do so. This man wasn't looking for rest. Having spent plenty of time communicating through their blades, Sigrún understood that much about Shiba.

“Steinþórr awaits you in Valhalla. I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself there.”

As a warrior, she wanted to witness the battle between those titans, but that wasn't an event she would bear witness to any time soon. Having survived the duel, she still had much to do.

The Steel Clan was prioritizing speed over all else, retreating as quickly as their legs would carry them. They were headed for the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr.

“Hurry along! The Flame Clan's not going to wait for us to clear out! Let's get as far from here as possible while Hveðrungr buys us time!” Yuuto shouted in encouragement to his soldiers as he ran alongside them, having recently dismounted from his chariot.



He didn't get off his chariot because he believed that it would do anything to lessen the burden on the retreating soldiers—he had done so because he understood that seeing him atop it as they ran on foot would only serve to breed resentment. After all, they had just recently lost a major engagement. If nothing changed, their morale would hit rock bottom in their next fight. For that reason, he couldn't afford the luxury of remaining mounted, lest he risk upsetting his men to the point of no return. No matter what kind of leader one was, their people were more likely to admire and entrust their lives to them if they could show that they were willing to share in their subjects' misery.

"I know I...*huff, huff*...decided to do this...*huff, huff*... But it's still tough...as all hell!"

Running long distances was challenging enough as is, but Yuuto was doing it while also yelling at the top of his lungs. He felt the fatigue building in his oxygen-starved body. If he hadn't spent every day since his arrival on Yggdrasil training, he might have been in a great deal of trouble.

"Are you okay?" asked Felicia, who had been running beside him. "Perhaps you should rest a little..." Unlike Yuuto, she didn't appear to be struggling—though she was sweating, her breathing was steady. Of course, this was unsurprising; she was an Einherjar, after all. Noticing this, Yuuto couldn't help but feel a tad envious of her.

Yuuto had inherited Rífa's runes following her death, and as such, he was supposed to be an Einherjar now himself. However, most of his ásmegin was still sealed away by the Gleipnir seiðr that had been used to summon him back to Yggdrasil. As a result, although he possessed twin runes, his physical abilities weren't much better than the average person's.

"*Huff, huff*... I'm...fine. I can't...stop people...from talking... *huff, huff*... If they saw me...resting...that would...defeat...the whole point...of this," Yuuto replied between gasps. Frankly speaking, he desperately wanted to get back on his chariot. However, this wasn't something he could compromise on.

"Very well. Just don't push yourself too hard," Felicia chided.

"*Huff, huff*... On the contrary... This is...the perfect time...to push...myself..." Yuuto said, smiling confidently even as he massaged his cramping flank. He had

lost against Nobunaga in two consecutive engagements. He could easily surmise that his soldiers' faith in him was wavering. Though running like this was agonizing, and his lungs burned for air, if this was all it took to boost morale a bit, then it was but a small price to pay. After all, the next battle wasn't one he could afford to lose.

"Besides... *huff, huff*... Big Brother is...handling the rear guard... *huff, huff*... At the very least, we don't...have to worry about them...catching...up... *huff, huff*... That makes things...much easier."

"You trust him quite a bit, don't you?"

"Well, yeah," Yuuto responded flatly.

It was true that, when examined objectively, Hveðrungr had been on a losing streak as of late, and he had looked rather off his game. However, from Yuuto's perspective, those losses had only occurred because Hveðrungr had been up against monstrously powerful opponents, and when accounting for that, Hveðrungr had done pretty well on the whole. Had anyone other than Hveðrungr been in command during those battles, there was no doubt that the Independent Cavalry Regiment would have been wiped out. This stood true even if that person had been Yuuto. It was precisely because of Hveðrungr's excellent observational skills and strategic flexibility that he had managed to pull through and get his men out alive.

"*Huff huff*... I know...better than anyone...what he is...capable of."

Yuuto had developed numerous weapons and implemented tactics that had originally only existed thousands of years in the future. In the face of Yuuto's innovations, a whole host of enemies had found themselves being swept aside without managing to put up much of a resistance: the Hoof Clan's great warlord Yngvi; the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army, led by the Sword Clan's Fagrahvél, who herself had been aided by Bára, one of the continent's three greatest strategists; the powerful tyrant of the Silk Clan, Utgarda. Every one of them had yielded to him in the end.

One of the few exceptions to Yuuto's overwhelming superiority had been the bundle of absurdity that was able to brute force his way through Yuuto's stratagems—the monster that was the Dólgprasir Steinþórr. However, the only

person from this era who had truly understood the strengths and weaknesses of Yuuto's various tools and tricks and had outmaneuvered him through sheer cunning was Hveðrungr. That was a remarkable feat. Even Nobunaga may not have been capable of such a thing had he been born on Yggdrasil. Hveðrungr, a tactician so brilliant that the world might see the likes of him once every century, had outright stated that he would buy them time. There was no doubt in Yuuto's mind that he would accomplish what he set out to do.

"You make a fair point. There are few people more troublesome to make an enemy of," Felicia agreed.

"Indeed."

"What exactly is he planning though? I'm sure it's something awful."

"Perhaps," Yuuto replied, following his answer to Felicia's question with a dry laugh.

"Impressive, Big Brother. You know what he's planning?"

"*Huff, huff...* I can't say...for sure... However, the things he asked me...to prepare for him... Arquebuses and tetsuhau...*huff, huff...*to equip the suicide squad...Skáviðr had left to him... When you take all that...and use them in a rear guard, there's only...*huff, huff...*one tactic...that he could possibly...be meaning to use..."

The tactic Yuuto was referring to had once allowed a general to hold off tens of thousands of enemy soldiers using less than one hundred soldiers of their own. It had been such a remarkable strategy that it had allowed the general's men to shoot a horse out from under a great warrior who had never been injured in battle to that point, and on top of that, it had also resulted in the fatal wounding of a great general known as a master of offensive warfare. During that retreat, the rear guard had managed to wound and kill several other notable commanders of the pursuing army. All this despite the fact that the pursuing army had outnumbered the rear guard by a vast margin. Even the victorious general had felt dread at the prospect of facing those enemy forces again and had subsequently decided to abandon the idea of any further campaigns against that province.

"You believe he's going to do it?"

“I think...it’s pretty likely, yeah...”

Hveðrungr had come up with a strategy that had originally been devised thousands of years in the future. Such a feat should have been impossible, even for him. However, he had done exactly that countless times already.

“Huff, huff... I did...think about doing it...but I couldn’t...bring myself to... huff, huff... He’s...a frightening man... I sometimes...wonder how I...beat him.”

“Right. Let me be blunt: you’re going to die today. Actually, allow me to be more specific: go and get yourselves killed,” Hveðrungr said coldly as he looked over the men assembled before him. There were maybe one hundred at most. None of them so much as raised an eyebrow at Hveðrungr’s remark.

“Oh? I thought at least one or two of you would show some fear.” Hveðrungr’s eyes went wide behind his mask. Despite having just been ordered to march out to their deaths, there was no trace of fear on the men’s faces—in fact, several of them even wore faint smiles, as though they welcomed the order. It was a strange sight, but that was par for the course. After all, they were the survivors of the rear guard that had expected to die alongside Skáviðr at the Battle of Glaðsheimr.

The men who made up this so-called suicide squad hailed from many walks of life. Some had lost their families and were simply looking for a place to die, others had volunteered in order to secure a widow’s pension for their family, and there were even warriors who wished to go out in a blaze of glory knowing that their days were numbered. Each of them had their own reasons for being here, but one fact was true of all of them: they had already accepted death.

“Wonderful. It would appear that you’re all perfect for my scheme,” Hveðrungr said, chuckling coldly. Once he had learned of the existence of gunpowder, he had been convinced that it had the potential to dramatically alter the face of battle. For that reason, he had been putting a lot of effort into developing tactics that made use of gunpowder weaponry, and he had one that was perfectly suited for the current situation.

“We hold no reservations about dying. However, our deaths need to mean something. Will your scheme slow the Flame Clan’s advance?” the commander

of the suicide squad asked, putting words to what the unit had been thinking. They may have been fearless warriors who were wholly unafraid of death, but there were only a hundred of them. They were facing off against an army that was over a thousand times larger. Under the circumstances, most units of their size would struggle to even buy a few minutes.

“That’s all on you. If you really are willing to die on this day, then you’ll be able to stop the enemy’s pursuit. So long as you don’t turn tail and run at the last moment, that is.”

There actually existed multiple companies that Skáviðr had created for covert operations, and if they all were to be combined, their ranks would number closer to three hundred. However, what Hveðrungr needed today wasn’t numbers. He needed unwavering commitment. Any who were even the slightest bit afraid of death would only serve as a hindrance. In that sense, the men gathered before him were perfect for the role he required of them.

“I see. Then all is fine. Our lives are yours to spend,” the company commander said calmly, ignoring the taunting edge in Hveðrungr’s remark.

Often when someone had struck close to home with a critique or when someone was threatening something that they wanted to protect, a person would find themselves becoming angry before they even knew it. The calmness of the commander’s response showed that he had no fear of death whatsoever.

“This may seem odd for me to say given the circumstances, but I’m surprised you’re so willing to trust me, considering I’m pretty much a stranger.”

“It’s not that we’re trusting you in particular. Father Skáviðr told us a great deal about you. He always said you were better suited to this sort of work than he was. We’re just trusting in his words.”

“Hrmph. So very kind of him.” In contrast to the words he spoke, Hveðrungr’s voice had a note of displeasure as he snorted. He did appreciate the presence of these men, given that his reputation had been tarnished from his recent string of failures. However, as a man who had once been the patriarch of a great clan, owing so great a debt to his late mentor still left a sour taste in his mouth. “Fine. Here’s the plan,” Hveðrungr said, then began to explain the strategy he had put together.

The expressions of the men who had so coolly accepted his order to die for him started to darken. The commander furrowed his brow and spoke plainly. “You’re one underhanded son of a devil, you know that? This isn’t something a human would come up with.”

“Heh, I’ll take that as a compliment.” Hveðrungr felt a surge of satisfaction and curled his lips up into a wily grin. He was hoping he’d be able to get some sort of emotional reaction from the stone-faced commander from the moment they had met. The fact that it had been able to surprise a man who was used to the darkest sides of war was a good indication of how likely it would be to succeed—it might even be outlandish enough to catch even the great Oda Nobunaga off guard.

“So, what will you do? Now that you know the details of my scheme, do you find yourselves afraid? If any of you wish to leave, do so now. Having you flee at the last minute would be a huge hassle,” Hveðrungr proclaimed with a smirk.

The commander shivered at the sight of Hveðrungr’s expression and swallowed. “We have no qualms about executing your plan. We shall do as you ask. By all accounts, it sounds like it’ll be very effective.”

“Good. Then go. Off to Valhalla with you.”

“Though we may end up there, you will not. You’re headed straight to the underworld,” the commander said sarcastically. Hveðrungr, however, was wholly unbothered by the comment. Instead, he chuckled.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

ACT 4

“Hrmph. It seems the Steel Clan’s retreated,” Nobunaga observed with disappointment as his forces stepped into Gjallarbrú Fortress. It was empty—not a single soul in sight. “I suppose such leadership is to be expected from a man who conquered half of Yggdrasil in just a few short years,” he continued. It hadn’t taken Nobunaga much time to organize an offensive force in the aftermath of the giant earthquake. Managing to successfully carry out the evacuation of tens of thousands of soldiers in that time was quite a feat of organizational prowess.

“I agree, My Lord. It is certainly quite impressive, considering he’s not even twenty years of age. That said, they can’t be that far away. Shall we pursue them?” Ran replied.

“No question about it. Of course we will,” Nobunaga stated, nodding his head in a manner as to suggest the answer was quite obvious before spurring on his horse. A well-established rule of battlefield warfare was that pursuits were the place in which an army could inflict the most casualties upon their enemy.

Although the Steel Clan Army had retreated due to the great earthquake, all but announcing their defeat at Gjallarbrú Fortress, it was clear that, with time, they would recover their morale and present a renewed threat to the Flame Clan. Suoh Yuuto was also extremely unpredictable. It was impossible to tell what else he might have up his sleeve.

With his body ravaged by disease, Nobunaga had no time left to waste. He needed to take this opportunity to settle things.

“Mm?!”

A while after the Flame Clan forces had set out in pursuit of the retreating Steel Clan soldiers, Nobunaga’s nose detected a faint but recognizable scent. No sooner had he done so than his body practically moved on its own, well before his mind had even finished processing what the smell actually was. A moment

after, a familiar thunderclap rang out, and Nobunaga felt a stinging sensation on his cheek as an object whipped past him.

“Tanegashimas!”

Nobunaga quickly identified the weapons used in the attack as he rubbed at his sore hip. If he hadn’t instinctively leaped off his horse, the bullet would have hit him in the head, instantly killing him. A small blessing, perhaps, that he was left only with a grazed cheek and an aching hip. He glared in the direction the bullet had come from and shouted out orders.

“Capture them!”

Though the shooter had been hidden behind shrubbery, the faint smoke rising from his burning matchlock gave away his position.

“My Lord! Are you oka...”

Another gunshot rang out from a completely different direction, and Ran, who had come over to check on his master, was thrown off his horse.

“Ran?!”

“I-I’m fine! They only caught my shoulder.”



Ran held his hand to his shoulder and immediately stood up, placing himself in front of Nobunaga and glancing around the area warily. He was trying to use his body to shield his lord, a habit from his time as Nobunaga's squire. Soon after, several more thunderclaps rang out.

"Guh!"

"Gack!"

A number of nearby Flame Clan soldiers fell from their horses as more gunshots echoed through the air.

"Looks like they had several more lying in wait," Nobunaga muttered angrily, clicking his tongue in frustration. The area they were currently in was covered with tall grasses and shrubs. It was extremely well-suited for an ambush.

"There he is!"

"Kill him!"

"They dare to attack the Great Lord?! Such flagrant disrespect!"

The Flame Clan soldiers quickly found the assailants and directed the full force of their hatred toward them. Unfortunately for the shooters, though tanegashimas were extremely powerful, they took a long time to reload.

It seemed as though it would only be a matter of time before they were caught, but then...

"Raaaah!"

Having run out of rounds, the shooters switched gears and started running desperately toward Nobunaga. It was a suicidal charge—they were intent on taking Nobunaga down with them. That said, there were only five of them. Ordinarily, they would stand no chance of success, but the objects they held in their hands would prove to be a significant issue.

Nobunaga began to issue his orders. "Men! Let loose your tetsuhau!" he yelled. His men quickly obliged. The oncoming attackers were deftly cut down by Flame Clan spears, but the dangerous objects in their hands had already been thrown.

“Begging your pardon, My Lord!” Ran charged into Nobunaga and shoved him to the ground. In the next instant, explosions sounded from all around them.

“Oomph!”

“Hot! M-My clothes!”

“Ahhh! My arm! My ARM!”

“I-I can’t see... I can’t see!”

Hellish screams filled the air in the wake of the explosions. While the tetsuhau weren’t particularly lethal, they had exploded at close range. They would have done their fair share of damage.

“My Lord, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, thanks to you. You’re the one I’m worried about.”

“I-I’m fine... Guh! Ngh!”

As Ran tried to get himself up, his face contorted in pain. Nobunaga forced Ran off of him and hurriedly checked on his injuries. The tetsuhau had seared parts of Ran’s clothing off, and several burn marks could be seen covering his back.

“Someone get Ran some treatment!”

“Yes, My Lord! Second, how are you holding up?”

“I’ve been better... There might still be enemies lurking nearby. I can’t leave the Great Lord’s side...”

Despite the fact that it must have been agonizing just to stand, Ran tried to stubbornly push aside the soldier’s hand as they tried to assist him. Although the teachings of Bushido that compelled Ran to risk his life for the sake of his master were something he personally lived by fervently, there weren’t many people who could actually consider giving their lives without the slightest hint of hesitation. Desperate situations like these were when people showed their true colors.

“Ran, your loyalty is worthy of the highest praise. However, that’s precisely why I can’t afford to lose you. There are plenty of soldiers around me now. Go

get yourself treated.”

“...Very well, My Lord. Please be careful.”

“Of course. Take him away.”

Nobunaga gestured with his chin, and two soldiers took Ran from either side, carrying him off for treatment. At a glance, Ran’s injuries didn’t appear to be fatal. He would likely be back in fighting shape before long. That wasn’t the main problem right now, however...

“Well, that was certainly quite the greeting.”

As the smoke filled the air, Nobunaga glanced down at the dead Steel Clan soldiers. Their expressions clearly displayed both their unwavering commitment and grim determination. He was also well aware that this particular incursion wouldn’t be the end of it. Even so, he couldn’t change course now. Nobunaga furrowed his brow as he considered the obstacles that awaited his army. “This is going to be a handful...” he remarked in mild frustration.

Nobunaga’s prediction turned out to be accurate. There were numerous groups of gunmen lying in wait for the Flame Clan Army as it advanced. The moment the Flame Clan Army’s units approached, they targeted their commanders with concentrated gunfire in an effort to dispatch them, and in the event that they failed, they then charged into the units with tetsuhaus in both hands. Three capable commanders had already been slain, and five more had been forced off the battlefield with serious injuries. As for the rank and file troops, their losses were much greater.

“This...isn’t Suoh Yuuto’s doing,” Nobunaga said as he furrowed his brow, having finally come to clearly grasp the situation he and his men found themselves in.

Although Suoh Yuuto was able to make the hard decisions needed of a ruler despite his youth, he was still not ruthless enough in Nobunaga’s view. Even if he was capable of being utterly merciless to his enemies, Suoh Yuuto wasn’t the sort of man who could order his own men to perform suicide attacks.

“Whatever the case may be, this tactic of theirs is impressively effective,”

Nobunaga stated and ruffled his hair in frustration.

Of course, Nobunaga was by no means incompetent. He had sent cavalry units ahead as scouts. However, Yggdrasil's terrain and flora provided countless places for ambushers to hide. It was nearly impossible to find small groups of enemies who were lying in wait, camouflaged to avoid detection. It was clear that if he pushed ahead with his pursuit, his army's losses would continue to mount. Conversely, if they made absolutely certain to hunt down any potential ambushers and clear out the path ahead entirely, they would end up letting the main body of the Steel Clan Army escape unscathed. Unusually for the typically decisive Nobunaga, he was uncertain on the best course of action.

"There's nothing to be done about it. Call off the pursuit. It's over."

After taking enough time to carefully consider the matter, Nobunaga let out a deep sigh and waved his hand to signal a halt. The ambushers were clearly focusing their efforts on taking down high-ranking Flame Clan Army officers.

Nobunaga was strictly meritocratic when it came to choosing his subordinates. Every single one of his commanders were exceptionally capable individuals. It made no sense for Nobunaga to continue to trade such valuable officers in exchange for the lives of a few enemy soldiers. The decision to call off his pursuit of the Steel Clan forces was a wise one.

The tactic Hveðrungr had utilized was a special kind of fighting retreat known in the Warring States Period as "Sutegamari."

It was the tactic that the warlord Shimazu Yoshihiro, known by the nickname of the Demon Shimazu, had used after the Battle of Sekigahara to escape the persistent pursuit by the significantly stronger Tokugawa Army with a mere eighty soldiers and retreat to Satsuma.

Though they were up against such a small rear guard, Honda Tadakatsu, one of the four great Tokugawa generals, had his horse shot out from under him, while another of the four generals, Ii Nomasa, was wounded by a gunshot which ended up killing him several years later, and even Ieyasu's son and renowned warrior Matsudaira Tadatatsu had been wounded.

There was, of course, no way that Hveðrungr was aware of that historical

precedent. He had, instead, come up with the strategy after learning of the existence of arquebuses and gunpowder. Such a ruthless and heartless tactic wasn't something that an ordinary person would decide upon. Even if they had managed to come upon the idea, their conscience would intervene and keep them from actually carrying it out in practice.

As Nobunaga had surmised, Yuuto had been aware of the tactic and was well aware of its effectiveness, but he had subconsciously removed it from his list of options. It was a tactic that only someone as ruthless and cold as Hveðrungr could have executed.

"Daddy, are you having trouble?" asked a young voice from below. It was Nobunaga's beloved daughter, Homura, who had been riding along on his horse.

"Hm? Honestly, yes. We're in something of a tight spot. If nothing changes, we'll let the Steel Clan get away."

Although that was what he said, Nobunaga had already moved on, thinking with a touch of anticipation that it made the Steel Clan an even worthier challenge. While he had won the recent standoff with Yuuto, it had been because of a fortuitous twist of fate—the great earthquake had done most of the work for him. Of course, Nobunaga was certain he would have brought down the fortress even without the assistance of the earthquake, but there was a part of him that knew it would leave questions surrounding the authority of his conquest. It wouldn't be so bad to be able to start over and settle things against the Steel Clan with his own hands. That was what he had been thinking, but...

"I'll take care of it for you then, daddy," Homura said with a bright grin.

Homura hummed to herself as she ran along the terrain. She moved at a speed that was unbelievable for a ten-year-old girl—such speeds would be more adequately associated with four-legged beasts. However, she was an Einherjar, and on top of that, she was blessed with twin runes, which gave her access to a monstrous amount of power—far more than the average Einherjar. She was still young, but her physical abilities far exceeded those of ordinary

people.

Homura suddenly stopped mid-stride, turned her head, and gazed intently at one spot in particular. What she saw was an overgrown field of grass. By all accounts, there was no trace of anyone or anything concealed in it. It would be a perfect spot for someone to hide in, and since the grass stretched in every direction, it would be impossible to tell that particular spot from any other—for anyone other than Homura, that is.

“Foouund you!” Homura said gleefully, a smile spreading across her face as she resumed running, splitting the grass apart in her wake. She showed no sign of hesitation as she made her way toward her target. Her movements made it clear she was completely certain that she knew where her quarry lay.

In reality, even Homura couldn’t see the enemy, and since she was upwind of her target, she also had no way of sniffing them out. No doubt they were lying in wait, meaning there was nothing to hear. Despite all that, she could still feel their presence; she was able to instinctively detect some semblance of life in the spot she was headed toward—something much more complex than the grass and the small animals she could see and hear around her.

Homura’s runes gave her the ability to control and strengthen living creatures. By manipulating those powers, she was able to use them to guide her. She sensed life—even if her eyes couldn’t see it, her nose couldn’t smell it, and her ears couldn’t hear it. It resulted in her being able to read the presence of opponents with a level of clarity that even surpassed that of Hildegard and Albertina of the Steel Clan.

“There you are.”

“Wha?! Oh, a child. Phew... Don’t surprise me like that. It’s dangerous here, so—Urk!”

The Steel Clan soldier tensed briefly but soon let out a sigh of relief upon seeing Homura...before she mercilessly drove her dagger into his throat. Since he had been caught completely off guard, the soldier collapsed into a pool of his own blood.

“One dowwwn!”

Homura flicked her dagger to dislodge the soldier's blood from it. She showed no signs of regret or fear, despite having just killed a person. It was as though she had merely stepped on a bug.

Homura didn't see most human beings as people. She sincerely felt that, while they were similar in shape and appearance, they were a different form of life entirely. That was because what they saw, what they felt, and what they could do were nothing alike to the things she was capable of. Why, then, would she consider any of them to be her equals? Her viewpoint was much the same as how any ordinary person might view monkeys. Historically, Europeans even treated other humans as animals simply because of the color of their skin. As one might suspect, in Yggdrasil, the concept of human rights didn't yet exist. So to Homura, she saw those she considered lesser to her as little more than livestock.

"Oh! Found another one!" Homura turned to look behind her and chuckled gleefully. To her, this was just a fun game of hide-and-seek. Children her age weren't able to put up even a semblance of a challenge, but hunting for prey that was lurking in this wide plain was just challenging enough to be entertaining.

"If I kill a bunch of them, then I bet daddy will be pleased!" Homura's grin widened as she imagined her father patting her head. Her father, Nobunaga, was the only other person she considered to be human. Though he couldn't see the world in the way that she did, he wholly believed that she did perceive the things around her differently. Unlike her mother, he never pretended to know what she felt, nor did he pretend that the things she saw didn't exist. Unlike the others, he wasn't afraid of her. He never furrowed his brow in displeasure at her, either. He simply accepted Homura for who and what she was. He always offered her his heartfelt praise whenever she did something. Nobunaga was the only person who treated her that way, and that was why she loved him so much. He was irreplaceable to her. Without him, Homura would end up being alone in this world.

"Okay! Time to hunt!"

To accomplish her father's dream of conquering the world, she would continue to wield her dagger against his enemies. She wanted to remove his

burdens and to be able to spend as much time as she could with him.

“What?! The Flame Clan’s already made it that far?! What are the suicide squads doing?!” Hveðrungr asked with annoyance as he listened to the scout’s report.

The Flame Clan Army was much closer to the Holy Capital than he had anticipated. His plan had worked almost too well over the first two days, and the Flame Clan Army had crept cautiously forward, but they were now marching as though there were no obstacles left.

“You made sure to assign useful men along the route, yes?” Hveðrungr asked the suicide company’s commander as he pointed to a specific location on the map in front of them.

It had been less than six months since Hveðrungr had inherited several covert operations companies from Skáviðr. During that time, Hveðrungr had participated in the conquest of the Silk Clan as one of the Steel Clan’s many generals, and he also had to deal with many other military units besides the suicide company. He had yet to fully grasp the personalities of every member of that particular company.

“The suicide company’s members were chosen carefully by Father Skáviðr. Given what the scheme entails, I can’t guarantee that none of them would have second thoughts before doing their part, but even then, it’s hard to believe they’d *all* lose their nerve.”

“Indeed...”

Hveðrungr nodded faintly and fell silent into thought. There was no denying that things had played out rather well for the first two days, meaning the members of the suicide company had done their jobs according to plan. It just wasn’t plausible that they’d all just coincidentally lose their nerve on this particular day. This conclusion was backed up by the commander’s assurances that there hadn’t been any mistakes in the selection process.

“Then it would appear that the enemy’s found some way to deal with it,” Hveðrungr concluded. That was the only explanation that he could think of. That only served to raise another question in Hveðrungr’s mind: What was their

solution?

Hveðrungr was confident that his plan was almost flawless. While it wasn't hard to find several dozen soldiers hiding in groups, finding individuals spread out over a vast plain was a much harder proposition. If the Flame Clan took the time and effort to search for them, they'd be found, of course, but that would take a non-trivial amount of time to achieve, and that, in itself, would serve the plan's purpose just as well. However, given that the Flame Clan infantry was marching toward the Holy Capital at breakneck speeds, it was highly unlikely they were committing any meaningful amount of their resources toward searching for the ambushers.

"Hm... I can't think of how they'd figure out the trick quite so quickly. That leaves only two conclusions: They have knowledge from the future, or they're making use of an Einherjar's powers." In Hveðrungr's experience, conventionally extraordinary circumstances tended to stem from one of those two causes, and he was, again, correct in this case.

"So, what do we do...?" he muttered, pondering his options.

They had already bought the Steel Clan two days to widen the distance between them and the Holy Capital. In that sense, he and his men had already fulfilled their role as the rear guard. There was nothing wrong with considering their mission completed and choosing to withdraw. However, reorganizing his men after a desperate retreat and getting them battle-ready would probably take a bit more time.

"It's not as if I have any responsibility to do that much for him though..."

While he and Yuuto had exchanged chalices as brothers, he hadn't sworn fealty to him. He had agreed to do so simply so he could see what would happen to the man who had defeated him. He had no strong attachment to the Steel Clan, so he saw no reason for him to risk his life for its survival. While he had ordered the soldiers of the suicide company to march to their deaths, Hveðrungr himself had no intention of doing the same. He felt no remorse over making that decision, nor was he particularly concerned about the fact that they were a precious inheritance from his mentor or that they were people he had known for the last six months. To Hveðrungr, they were simply pawns for

him to use for his own ends. After all, the members of the suicide company were all volunteers, and thanks to them—just a few soldiers lying in ambush—he had managed to slow down an army of a hundred thousand and wound or kill several enemy commanders in the process. They hadn't died in vain. If anything, this was one of the most cost-effective tactics he could have possibly chosen. He had given purpose to the deaths of a handful of lowly soldiers. Hveðrungr sincerely believed that, if anything, those soldiers owed him their thanks. This rational and pitiless mindset of his was why Skáviðr had left the handling of the Steel Clan's covert operations to him.

“Oh, that reminds me. She's going to be a mother, isn't she?” As he was about to turn his men around and prepare for the journey back to the Holy Capital, Hveðrungr stopped in his tracks.

While he cared very little for people in general, his younger blood sister was the sole exception. Since their mother had died early on in their lives, and their father, as Second of the Wolf Clan, had spent most of his time in the palace, it had been Hveðrungr, or rather Loptr as he had been at the time, who had cared for the young Felicia. In fact, he felt he was the one who had raised her. That had been why he had been enraged at the fact that she had abandoned him and taken Yuuto's side. It was perhaps easiest to understand if described as a father's emotions when his daughter chose someone over him.

“She's that old now, huh?” Hveðrungr murmured to himself as he thought back to the day she had been born...

“You absolute moron!”

The man slapped Loptr's cheek with all of his might, and Loptr clutched at his face in pain, quickly sinking to the ground. Had he been over twenty years or so of age, he would have never taken such a blow to his face, but at the time, he had only been eight years old. While he was blessed with vastly greater physical abilities than children of the same age, he was still a child. He could do nothing against a grown man. That was all the more true given that the man was his birth father.

“Why did you mention your rune?! I made you swear to silence!”

“B-Because he was my best friend... We promised we’d be brothers when we grew up...”

Another loud slap silenced Loptr’s attempt at a defense.

“You fool! This is what happens when you trust a so-called ‘friend.’”

“Huh?” Loptr blinked in surprise. He had no idea what his father was talking about. Why was telling his friend the reason he was getting slapped?

“You still haven’t realized? Why do you think I know that you told him about your rune?”

“Oh!”

This was when Loptr finally figured it out. He had made his friend swear not to tell anyone, since his father had told him not to tell anyone. Despite that, the news had reached his father’s ears—meaning his friend had blabbed.

“Didn’t I tell you that it’s dangerous for people to find out you have a rune?!”

“B-But... Everyone says that they want to be Einherjar and that they’re treasured by their clans...”

“Many desperately yearn to become Einherjar. By that same measure, they come to envy those who are blessed with such a gift.”

‘Yearn’? ‘Envy’? The words didn’t mean anything to the eight-year-old Loptr. Still, he wasn’t going to say that out loud. Though he was still young, he understood that speaking back to his father like that would simply be pouring more fuel onto his fiery rage.

“Listen, Loptr. We’re outsiders. We weren’t born as members of the Wolf Clan. You must always remember that.”

Loptr had heard that his father had originally been Second of the Hoof Clan, but had lost the succession battle to his little brother Yngvi and had ended up in this backwater between the mountains as a result.

“Outsiders...?”

It didn’t quite click for him. Loptr considered himself a member of the Wolf Clan who was growing up as part of his clan. According to his father, however,

Loptr had been born in Hoof Clan lands, making him an outsider.

“Exactly. If outsiders like us, who hail from a different land, make their homes in a new clan and push aside those who originally lived here and gain status, it’ll only serve to breed resentment on their part.”

“...Yes sir.”

Loptr hung his head as he nodded. Even at his age, he understood what those words meant. Loptr was a talented boy who was able to fight on more than even terms with children several years his senior at an age when a single year made a world of difference. The things his father was suggesting likely explained why the boy that had bossed around the local kids until recently had started to treat him like an enemy—even though Loptr had no interest in leading the boys and just wanted to be friends with everyone.

“There’s plenty of people in this clan who are displeased by the fact that an outsider has managed to climb up to the rank of Assistant Second. If they learn that you, my son, are an Einherjar, that’ll only enrage them further. There might be some who will think of nipping the problem in the bud while you’re still a child.”

“So they would choose to kill someone who could become a great boon for their clan?”

Einherjar are substantially more powerful than ordinary people. They were a presence that practically promised prosperity and stability to the clan as adults. To frame the point differently, choosing to kill one would mean causing grievous harm to the clan’s future success. It would be like stamping down on shoots that had sprouted out of farmland. Doing so would, of course, mean no food in the future. Even if he was only eight years old, Loptr was a smart boy—he couldn’t understand why anyone would take such an illogical course of action.

“Yes. They’d kill you. However great a benefit you might provide to the clan as a whole, and whatever oaths you might swear to it, they’d still get rid of people like us if they decided that we’d get in their way. They would do so without a second thought. That’s what people are like,” his father said flatly.

There was no way that was true. Surely there were people who valued loyalty

and compassion. People who valued those things above all else certainly had to exist. However, people only believed what they've seen and experienced for themselves, and having been driven from the Hoof Clan, that belief about the fallibility of human nature was Loptr's father's primary driving force.

"Listen and listen well, Loptr. Don't believe in others. The only one worth trusting is yourself. The fact of the matter is, you're being punished and lectured because your best friend betrayed you."

"..."

He was right. If Loptr hadn't trusted his friend and told him, his cheek wouldn't be swelling with pain right now. No doubt his friend hadn't thought such a thing would happen, which was why he had so casually told his parents. From there, the news had spread as a rumor and eventually reached Loptr's father's ears. According to his father, Loptr now faced the risk of death from jealous people in the clan. All of this because he had decided to trust someone.

"But surely you can't live without trusting others. I have no choice but to trust that you'll earn silver and raise me, for example. And then there's an even more wide-reaching example: if we couldn't trust that the clan's farmers would produce food, then the clan as a whole wouldn't be able to exist," Loptr explained.

"You are indeed a smart one." His father appeared to appreciate some of the reasoning behind Loptr's words and nodded. Loptr was happy that his father had praised him, but that only lasted for a moment. Soon after, more darkness began to fill his young heart.

"You're absolutely right, Loptr. People can't live alone. So use them. Don't trust them, and don't believe in them; simply use them as tools."

"Will anyone follow such a terrible person...?"

"Just smile—pleasantly and kindly. Listen to what others are saying, find the words they want to hear, and say exactly those. Doing that is more than enough to get people on your side; you don't even have to mean it."

"Will that really work...?"

"Of course. All the talk about sincerity and truthfulness being important is

little more than theatrics. You don't need to *actually* be either of those things, you just have to appear that way. Even if you don't feel those things, they'll believe it if your act's good enough, so make sure you're convincing."

"..."

Loptr, who would come to be known as a mercilessly ruthless tyrant, was still only eight years old when his father had taught him this valuable life lesson. He fell silent at the sheer brutality of his father's words.

"Loptr, even ignoring the fact that you are my son, you've got a quick mind and a talent for fighting. You're sensitive to people's feelings, and you're good-looking. With all these boons at your disposal, I do not doubt that, in time, you'll become the patriarch of this Wolf Clan, which is why you must learn what it takes to be the person who stands above all others."

"..."

"Watch others carefully, Loptr. What pleases people, what enrages them, what saddens them, what they seek. With that knowledge, craft a mask that others will like and use it to manipulate them."

As Loptr fell into a shocked silence, his father continued to push his beliefs into him. His father was probably trying to make sure that Loptr would avoid the fate that had befallen him. Part of it was likely due to his expectations as a father of a talented child. That, in itself, was a sort of curse, because whether Loptr wanted it or not, and whether he loved his father or not, the values of a child's parents, for better or for worse, end up taking root in the child's mind.

After this lecture, Loptr would begin to construct his facade, a smiling and gentle personality—and proceed to don it so often that he would end up losing sight of himself, but that is a story for another time.

"My Lord! I bring urgent news!" a servant yelled in a panic as he hurriedly ran into the room.

Loptr's father barked at the unwanted visitor. "What is it?! I'm in the middle of an important talk. Come back later!"

"B-But sir, her ladyship has gone into labor..."

“Whaaat?! The midwife said it would take another ten days!”

“I-I understand that, but it is actually happening...”

“Tch! Call the midwife! Make sure you call a second one as well. I can’t trust my child to one who could make such poor observations of my wife’s pregnancy!”

With that, his father hurriedly left the room. He was probably going to the side of his wife—Loptr’s mother. Despite holding a rank senior enough for him to be able to take more wives or concubines, his father remained wholly committed to his wife. Even from a child’s eyes, it was clear he was smitten with her. It would turn out that this was because she was the only one who had followed him after he was exiled from the Hoof Clan. Recalling that, a question was raised in Loptr’s young mind.

“Father. You said not to trust others, but do you not trust Mother?” Loptr asked his father after he had been driven out of the room by the women once the labor had gone into full swing. His father blinked his eyes in surprise.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Your mother is family. Not a stranger!”

“So family is okay, but Chalice parents and siblings are not?” Loptr asked in apparent confusion.

The Chalice was supposed to make those who aren’t related by blood into members of your family. So was the difference simply down to blood? That didn’t make sense though; his father and mother weren’t related by blood. Even so, his father trusted his mother because she was family. So what, then, made their relationship so special? Loptr couldn’t understand what differentiated the two types of people.

“Precisely. You may be too young to understand, but Chalice siblings are engaged in a constant struggle for power under the surface. It’s an utterly worthless bond.”

“Oh, I see.”

The act of exchanging Chalicees with people you trust made you family with them. It created a bond that was thicker than blood. You then worked with that new family to bring prosperity to and protect the Wolf Clan. That had been

Loptr's childish dream. But that dream had just been completely shattered by his father. Try as he might, however, his father had no way of understanding Loptr's feelings.

"So now you understand. The only people I can trust are my real family—you and your mother."

"The baby that's about to be born is also family, right?" Loptr asked his father hesitantly.

His father had failed to consider it because Loptr was so smart and talented, but most people needed something to believe in—something to trust in. That was particularly true when they were young. Having suddenly lost that thing, Loptr was struck with extreme anxiety. What about the baby that was about to be born? Was it going to be part of their family? If they aren't, then he'd have to look at the baby with suspicion and wear a mask of lies when interacting with them, despite them being a younger sibling born of the same father and mother.

"Of course. They'll be your brother or sister. That makes them your family—there is no doubt about that. Make sure you take care of them!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Loptr felt a surge of relief and nodded firmly. That was exactly what he had hoped to hear. There was no way he wouldn't take care of his new sibling.

"Waaah! Waaah!"

The cry of a baby echoed from the bedroom. It seemed his mother had safely given birth.

"She's done wonderfully! Let's go, Loptr!"

"Yes sir!"

The father and son hurriedly entered the bedroom. Loptr's beautiful mother's face was soaked with sweat, and she was slumped on the bed. As tired as she appeared, there was a certain satisfaction and sense of accomplishment clearly present on her features. The newborn baby was being washed and cleaned in warm water by the midwife.

“Ah, My Lord! Her ladyship has safely given birth to an adorable girl!”

“Wonderful! Brilliant work indeed! I’ve already decided on a name. Felicia! Your name is Felicia!”

Having named her, his father took the baby from the midwife and held her. The fact that he was properly supporting her neck with his arm showed his experience as a father.

“Felicia... This girl...is my sister...”

Peering into her face, Loptr was engulfed by a strange emotion. The midwife had called her adorable, but objectively speaking, it was hard to describe her as cute. He had seen babies from other families before, and compared to those infants, Felicia’s skin was wrinkled from water, and her face looked terrible. Even so, Loptr felt an intense love for her. He couldn’t help but feel a responsibility to protect her. She was his one and only younger sister. She was one of the few people in the world that he could trust without reservation. He swore to himself that he would value her above all else—that he would do anything to secure her happiness.

“Heh. I did swear such a thing as a child, didn’t I...?” As he recalled that day, Loptr—Hveðrungr—snorted derisively at himself. The idea that family wouldn’t betray him, that family needed to be valued, was now an absurd notion that he dismissed out of hand. Back then, however, Loptr had believed it from the bottom of his heart.

“Bah, fine then. I’d hate to do something for Yuuto, but I suppose I can give Felicia a gift to celebrate her pregnancy.”

He wasn’t doing this because he had remembered his oath or anything so cheap as that. He knew all too well that even family couldn’t be fully trusted—that there were times when even family would betray you. Hveðrungr was well aware that his father’s words were a mirage built on sand. The fact of the matter was that Felicia had chosen Yuuto over him. He had no responsibility to do anything for a sister who had done that to him. While he understood that in his head, there was a part of him that simply couldn’t abandon his sister. The childhood oath he had taken was too deeply rooted in him.

“I suppose I can’t mock Yuuto while I’m being like this.”

He knew he was being too sentimental. Strangely enough, though, he didn't dislike that part of himself, nor did it feel at all unpleasant.

"Brilliant. We have a perfect vantage point. We can easily see the entire area from here." Hveðrungr nodded from atop a small rocky outcropping as he glanced down at the plains that stretched out under him. Since he was in a relatively high location, it was likely enemy scouts would search the area, given that it was so strategically valuable. He wouldn't have minded that happening though. He was confident he could at least secure his own survival, and it might be useful to have a Flame Clan soldier to interrogate to see how they were fending off one of his greatest tactical creations to date.

"Well then, let's see what they've got."

Since they were lying prone on the ground, he couldn't see them from his position, but he had already sent five members of the suicide company to conceal themselves in the grass. All that remained was to wait for the Flame Clan to approach.

"Hm?"

About an hour later, he saw a young girl walking down the dirt path that had been cut through the grassy plain. There were a fair number of bandits and raiders outside of fortified cities. It was extremely strange to see a girl of that age wandering around on her own. What caught his attention more than anything else was the girl's clothing. Her garments didn't look like they came from anywhere in Yggdrasil. Of course, Yggdrasil was a large continent, and there was some difference in culture between each region, but even then, the clothing that she wore struck Hveðrungr as odd. More than anything, however...

"Looks like there's our target."

"Huh? That girl?" the suicide company commander said and blinked. While he probably also noticed that she was oddly dressed, he seemed unable to abandon his preconceptions—he couldn't bring himself to believe that a girl of about ten years old could possibly be a threat. Hveðrungr, however, was certain

that she was the one. In fact, the moment he saw her, he had realized with a shudder of dread that she was the reason for their plan's reduced effectiveness. There was no other possible explanation.

"Don't be fooled by appearances. She is a terrifying monster."

"Is that so...?"

"You may not be able to tell, but the ásmegin flowing from that girl is comparable to Steinþórr."

"The Dólgprásir?!" Upon hearing that name, the commander's expression changed.

A few moments later, he appeared to have pulled himself together somewhat, but his eyes still seemed to say that Hveðrungr had to be exaggerating. Evidently, the idea that there was another person who was even remotely as strong as that outrageously overpowered monster was too implausible for him. He had interpreted Hveðrungr's observation to be an exaggeration designed to get him to take the situation seriously. In response, Hveðrungr let out a slow sigh.

"Let me make sure we're clear. I'm not exaggerating in the slightest. That girl's ásmegin really is similar to that monster's."

As a seiðr wielder, Hveðrungr was able to perceive ásmegin to some extent. Still, the fact that he was able to see it so clearly at this distance meant the girl's ásmegin was exceptionally powerful. An absurd amount was emanating from her, and it was unbelievably dense, at that.

"So you're serious, huh...? Still, to suggest it's at *that* level..." the commander replied as his expression twisted into a sour grimace.

Hveðrungr fully understood what he was feeling. Truthfully, he would have preferred to avoid fighting that monster, especially because they were on a covert mission where he only had five other men with him. Even if he included the men still hidden away in the grass, there were only ten of them. That wasn't nearly enough to take down a monster who was comparable to Steinþórr.

"Whatever the case may be, she's still a child. I find it unlikely that she's able to make full use of that much ásmegin," Hveðrungr stated.

“Even if that’s true, we’re still in trouble. The rumor is that Steinþórr single-handedly conquered a fortress when he was thirteen.”

“That’s not a rumor, that’s exactly what happened,” Hveðrungr replied flatly.

“You’ve gotta be kidding...”

“Unfortunately not. Ah, hold on. She’s moving.”

The girl below spun her head around, and a moment later, dashed into the grass from the road. The grass rustled as she pushed through it. She was moving toward one of the soldiers’ hiding spots.

“Guh!”

A short death cry rang out and blood sprayed into the air. While the grass had obstructed their view, it was safe to assume that the girl was responsible. The grass rustled again—she was on the move once more. She was clearly headed toward another concealed soldier.

“Tch. So she can tell where our soldiers are hiding.”

If that wasn’t the case, then she wouldn’t be able to so unflinchingly head to her targets. Once might be a coincidence, but given that it had happened twice in succession, it was safer to assume that she was capable of detecting them in some way. Given the absurd ásmegin that enveloped her, it was clearly some sort of ability granted to her by a rune.

“The plan had even accounted for an Einherjar showing up... Ugh,” Hveðrungr spat out sourly.

He had planned for the possibility of an Einherjar with sharp senses—someone like Sigrún, Hildegard, or the Claw Clan twins—showing up by positioning his troops downwind and having them remain completely still. Even someone as observationally gifted as Hveðrungr would find it incredibly difficult to find soldiers lying prone in this wide grass plain. Even making use of an ability similar to the one granted by the late Spear Clan patriarch Hárbarth’s rune—Skilfingr, the Watcher from on High—would barely make it any easier.

“That settles it. There’s little doubt in my mind that she possesses twin runes. What a blasted nuisance.”

She had used brute force to overcome a strategy that had required every ounce of his intelligence to produce. There was nothing more frustrating to a tactician.

“...Hm?”

He felt a strong gaze in his direction and turned to face it. It was then that he saw that the girl had returned to the road and was staring in his direction. She then began dashing toward them like a loosed arrow.

“Hrmph. She’s noticed us. What shall we do...?”

If they chose to run now, he would survive for the time being. No matter how superhuman her physical abilities were, she wouldn’t be able to match the speed of a trained horse.

However, letting that girl run free was extremely dangerous for the Steel Clan. The Flame Clan Army numbered a hundred thousand, while the Steel Clan numbered only thirty thousand. Given that there wasn’t a great deal of difference in the quality of their weapons and armor, it would be no contest in a direct battle, meaning that it would require some mix of tactics and guile to win. The problem was that the enemy had a method of knowing the precise location of their soldiers—meaning any clever tactics he could conjure up were likely to fail.

“Now, the issue I face is whether I can come up with something that can deal with her detection capabilities...”

Hveðrungr couldn’t help but smirk bitterly. While he considered himself a tactician and trickster first and foremost, he also considered himself one of the top ten individual warriors on Yggdrasil. He was probably being modest in that estimation, and if he was to be brutally honest, he would say he was one of the three greatest warriors on the continent. With Steinþórr and Skáviðr now dead, he felt he wouldn’t lose to anyone but Sigrún and the Flame Clan’s Berserker General Shiba. His intuition told him that even if his opponent had twin runes, he couldn’t see himself losing against such a young opponent. Of course, twin-runed Einherjar were creatures that surpassed most common sensibilities. Having once been allied with Steinþórr, Hveðrungr knew just how absurd a twin-runed Einherjar could be.

“Right then. You lot, return to the Holy Capital on horseback and tell Yuuto—Uncle about her,” finishing his thought process, Hveðrungr immediately issued orders to the commander. Accurate information was the most important factor in deciding victory or defeat. Informing Yuuto about the existence of a twin-runed Einherjar was the highest priority under the current circumstances.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll fight her here. Nothing wagered, nothing gained. As the saying goes: you need to venture into the tiger’s den to claim a tiger cub,” Hveðrungr quirked his lips into a grin as he quoted something Yuuto had once told him.

An important individual who posed an extreme risk to the Steel Clan Army was out here alone with no escort. In an actual decisive battle, if she were located in the heavily-defended command area, killing her would be next to impossible. Simply put, this was an opportunity that was too good to pass up.

“I wasn’t planning to go this far,” Hveðrungr muttered to himself as he watched the commander depart on horseback.

The reason Hveðrungr had joined Yuuto was simply that he had wanted to see how far the man who had defeated him could go. That, and because he wanted to watch over his beloved younger sister. He would have been fine with doing just enough to make sure that he and his subordinates didn’t want for anything and could live comfortably. He had no intention of willingly exposing himself to danger.

Of course, when he had faced off against the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army and, more recently, against Nobunaga, he had inadvertently exposed himself to danger, but that had just been because the enemy’s tactics had been better than he had anticipated. But this? Facing off against a twin-runed Einherjar? This was going too far, even to celebrate Felicia’s pregnancy. Fighting a twin-runed monster like Homura, even if she was only young, was essentially the same as going up against a tiger or bear by himself.

“This is mad, even by my own standards.”

Hveðrungr wasn’t quite certain why he had made this choice. The only way he was able to describe it was that he had been struck by the impulse to do so. If he was forced to put it into words, it was because the thought was irritating—

the thought of Yuuto losing to Nobunaga, that is. He had made all sorts of excuses up to this point, but that was simply something that he couldn't bear. But again, admitting that was also rather irritating.

"I suppose this is a good opportunity to repay everything I owe my mentor too. It's a bit gross to feel like I'm still in his debt."

After voicing another excuse to himself, convincing himself of his reasoning, Hveðrungr drew his sword from his hip. Standing in front of him was a black-haired girl blinking in surprise as she looked at him.

"Wow! It's some weird old guy in a mask!" Homura couldn't help but blink and shout out in surprise. She had felt the presence of a much stronger opponent than those she had been easily dispatching so far, and she had come expecting a big find, only to be presented with an odd-looking man donning a butterfly-design mask and long hair—perhaps not the appearance one would typically associate to a warrior of such power.

"Did you really just call me old? I'll have you know I'm still in my twenties, you brat."

"I'm not a brat! I'm ten years old! My daddy even held me a coming of age ceremony!" Homura shot back with indignation.

His comment reminded her of just how useless adults truly were. They possessed not an ounce of ability to see or feel the world for what it really was, nor did they command any true strength. However, despite this, they still had the nerve to look down upon Homura because of her age. Every adult besides her daddy was worthless—this she knew well.

"You made me mad, so I sentence you to death. Though it's not like I was gonna spare you anyways."

Homura lightly kicked at the ground to lunge forward and thrust out the dagger in her hand. However, her lightning-quick thrust was easily deflected, and in response...

"Eeep!"

A mercilessly sharp slash came down toward her. She hurriedly jumped backward to avoid it, but even then, the blade took a few of her bangs.

“Unbelievable, given your age. As I suspected, you really do possess twin runes,” the man said calmly as he slowly drew back his sword.

While his expression was hard to read—his face being hidden under his mask—his eyes clearly showed that he had no intention of underestimating her. The blow she had just avoided, despite being aimed at a child, was completely merciless. She could tell he had fully intended to kill her. Homura smiled happily.

“Oh wow! That’s impressive! The only ones who could tell how strong I am at a glance were Shiba and that weirdo Vassar.”

“Then the Flame Clan’s full of blind men, it would seem. It’s plain to see that you’re a monster.”

“Calling a girl a monster is mean!” Despite her words, Homura’s face and voice showed no signs of displeasure whatsoever. If anything, she seemed to be enjoying this whole experience.

“Hey, if you know how strong I am, then why don’t you surrender? I’ll make you my lackey.” Homura asked with a smile.

This man could “see” like she could. Given how rare such people were, it would be a pity to kill him. She definitely wanted to keep him as a pet.

“Heh. You think to propose that I, Hveðrungr, become your lackey? Ignorance truly is frightening.”

“Hve...what? That’s way too hard to say, so I’m just gonna call you Hve.”

“Tch. This is why I hate children...” Hve...something clicked his tongue in displeasure.

As far as Homura was concerned, she felt that he was petty for an adult. He was getting mad just because she couldn’t remember his name.

“So, what’ll it be? Will you be my lackey or not?”

“I don’t have any intention of serving under a child, especially if that child is some bratty weakling who knows nothing.”

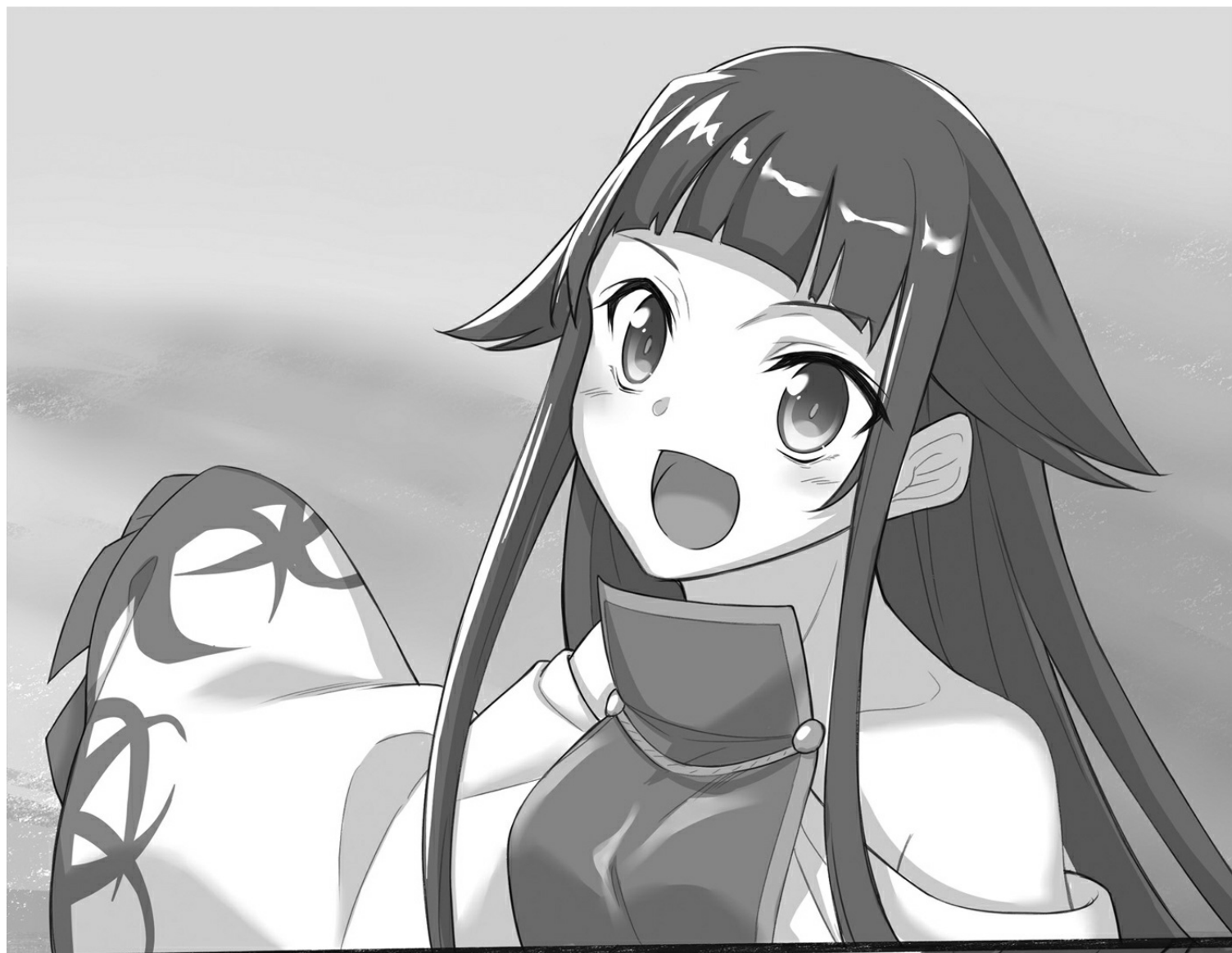
“Did you just...call me weak? I thought you could see the world exactly like I do, but I guess I was wrong...”

Homura sighed as disappointment spread over her features. This “Hvesomething” was, in fact, quite strong, but he was far weaker than Shiba, and he was nothing compared to her. The fact that he didn’t understand that disappointed Homura more than anything. Still, someone who could see the things that most others couldn’t was a valuable asset.

“Looks like you need a bit of a lesson.”

“Hrmph, that’s my line, brat. I’ll teach you how scary grown-ups can be. Unfortunately, you’ll be paying for that lesson with your life.”

They exchanged taunts and glared at one another; then, in the very next moment, the sharp sound of metal clashing with metal could be heard ringing through the air.



ACT 5

“Waaaa! Mother Rún! I’m so glad you’re alive! What a great day this is!”

“Stop making such a racket. You’re making my head ring.”

In lárnvíðr, Hildegard and Sigrún were having their moving reunion. While her words and expression suggested that Sigrún was displeased, in truth, this was a wonderful reunion with her beloved little sister. Not to mention, it had come after an enormous natural disaster. She had been concerned for Hildegard’s safety whilst they had been separated. She was pleased to see that she was safe.

That said, she had overused the Realm of Godspeed during her battle with Shiba, and she was suffering from a massive headache as a result of that. Hildegard’s loud, clear voice was only making it worse.

“But, but...! We couldn’t find you for days! I was so worried you were dead! Why wouldn’t I be crying tears of happiness right now?! Waaaaah!”

As Hildegard’s bawling intensified, Sigrún’s face took on a look of utter exhaustion. As always, Hildegard made no effort to actually listen to what anyone was saying. Still, in this case, it was somewhat forgivable that she would be so overcome with emotion. Following the great earthquake, it had taken Sigrún three days to return to lárnvíðr, largely because she had struggled to even walk in the aftermath of her intense battle with Shiba—especially because she was suffering from the aftereffects of overusing the Realm of Godspeed. Just as she had started to seriously consider the possibility that she might starve to death out in the wilderness, her beloved wolf Hildólfr had found her, and she had returned to lárnvíðr atop Hildólfr’s back.

“Yes, you’re totally right. I’m sorry I made you worry. As you can see though, I’m alive, so rest easy.”

For the moment, Sigrún decided to focus on reassuring the crying Hildegard. Ordinarily, she would never let Hildegard occupy the moral high ground, but if

she let Hildegard carry on as she was, she might very well be forced into Valhalla as her headache reached unbearable heights.

“Sniff, sniff... So long as you understand. I was really worried!”

With that, Hildegard loudly sniffed and cleared her nose. It seemed her flood of emotions had abated somewhat after Sigrún had shown that she understood Hildegard’s feelings. Sigrún let out a soft sigh of relief. However, things hadn’t calmed down just yet.

“Sigrún! You’ve returned! Thank the gods!”

Sigrún let out a grunt of pain as a different, equally ringing voice pierced her head. Linnea had arrived. While she wasn’t speaking very loudly, she had a voice that carried a long distance. Normally, Linnea’s voice was very reassuring to hear, but today, Sigrún would have preferred not to hear it.

“If you’d died, I wouldn’t have known what to say to Father. Well done for getting back alive!”

“I-I did what I could... I made it back alive somehow,” Sigrún answered with a forced smile.

While Sigrún could issue orders to Hildegard, who was her junior, Linnea was her sworn big sister. Not only that, but Linnea was also the Steel Clan’s Second—the clan officer in charge of all of its children. It would have been one thing had she been a dull and incompetent individual, but Sigrún admired Linnea for her ability. She couldn’t bring herself to speak disrespectfully to her.

“You don’t look to be in the best shape though. Are you injured?”

Linnea’s expression clouded with worry as she saw that Sigrún wasn’t sitting atop Hildólf’s back, but rather lying atop it.

“I just pushed myself a bit too far. I believe I’ll recover with a bit of time.”

Though she was still struggling to walk, her current state was still a vast improvement. After all, immediately following her battle with Shiba, she had been left practically paralyzed by her pain.

“Too far, you say? What could possibly have occurred for you to end up in such a state?”

“I found myself having to face off against Shiba after I had crawled ashore.”

“What?! Shiba?! D-Did you win?!”

It seemed the news had been a total shock for Linnea. Her eyes went wide with surprise.

“If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t be speaking to you right now.”

“Oh, yeah... That makes sense. It’s a blessing that you made it out alive.”
Linnea then slowly let out a long sigh of relief.

In the Steel Clan’s most recent engagement, Linnea had taken supreme command of the clan’s forces. Given that Shiba had somehow managed to escape a complete Steel Clan encirclement through his sheer skill as a warrior, she understood just how powerful a foe he was.

“It truly was. Honestly, I can only consider myself lucky to have survived.”

It had been by nothing more than coincidence that she had been able to enter the Realm of the Water Mirror. She had only come to understand how to make use of it because she had overused the Realm of Godspeed, and her consciousness had grown hazy. If she had retained any mental clarity at the time, she wouldn’t have been able to achieve what she had. Nearly losing consciousness during the fight would, in other circumstances, ordinarily be a death sentence. In this case, she had truly been lucky. She had literally won by the skin of her teeth.

“It doesn’t matter if it was luck or coincidence. All that matters is that you’re alive.”

Sigrún let out a grunt of pain as Linnea gently patted her shoulder. Even the slightest vibration sent jolts of pain running through her entire body.

“Ah, I’m sorry! I have to say though, that wasn’t a particularly heavy touch. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m sure. I haven’t suffered any meaningful physical wounds. It’s just that whenever I enter the Realm of Godspeed, I end up with aftereffects like these.”

“I see... Well, rest and recover...is what I wish I could say, but we can’t afford you that luxury.”

“Did something happen to Father?!” Sigrún asked, reflexively sitting up atop Hildólfr. Pain wracked her entire body, but it didn’t matter to her—she was still needed on the battlefield. The fighting in the west had been settled, which must mean that she was needed in Ásgarðr, where Yuuto currently was facing off against the Flame Clan. Sigrún had already been anxious about the situation in Ásgarðr even before this point.

“Well, it’d be wrong of me to tell you to rest easy, but Father, at least, is in no immediate danger.”

“I-I see...”

Upon hearing Linnea’s response, Sigrún let out a sigh of relief. At the very least, things weren’t so bad that there was no chance of recovery. After all, even a twin-runed Einherjar couldn’t bring the dead back to life.

“But I would assume things aren’t going well?”

“Your assumption is correct. According to the carrier pigeon, the Gjallarbrú Fortress collapsed in the recent earthquake, and they were forced to retreat to the Holy Capital.”

“...I see,” Sigrún furrowed her brow and said bitterly.

It was true that the recent quake was much more powerful than any that had come before. Sigrún had heard that Gjallarbrú had been constructed using the same Roman concrete as lárnvíðr’s walls. Sadly, even that wasn’t enough to stand up to the force of such a monstrous earthquake.

“He intends to return to the Holy Capital to regroup and fight the Flame Clan forces there,” Linnea explained.

“It certainly does sound like things are rather grim,” Sigrún replied and nodded with a tense expression.

Even if it had been caused by a natural disaster, a loss was a loss. This loss was not the first, which only served to make things worse. In the Battle of Glaðsheimr that had taken place not long before, the Steel Clan Army had been defeated by the Flame Clan Army and made to retreat. Two straight losses... The impact such an eventuality would have on the army’s morale would be devastating. Winning against an army three times his number, one commanded

by the legendary Oda Nobunaga, while his own army was sapped of morale would be a difficult task even for Yuuto.

“That they are. For that reason, we need to head to the Holy Capital as soon as possible. News of our victory in the west, as well as the prospect of their allies coming to aid them, will fill the hearts of the soldiers hunkered down in the Holy Capital with renewed vigor. Even more so if they were led by our army’s Goddess of Victory, the Mánagarmr who had just slain Shiba, the enemy’s greatest warrior.”

“I understand. I agree that there is no time for me to sit around resting.”

“As much as I hate to do this to you, it’s the truth of the matter. I’m leaving Father in your care. I’ll head to the Holy Capital as soon as the army’s main body is ready.”

Sigrún turned to her little sister and issued her orders.

“Yes, ma’am. Hilda, gather the others. We’re leaving immediately.”

Hildegard furrowed her brow in concern. “Immediately? Mother Rún, can you handle a march in that state?”

“Well, if I’m honest it’ll be quite hard, but I can’t afford to be selfish,” Sigrún replied.

“Selfish...?” Hildegard said with a faintly exasperated, dry laugh.

Sigrún understood what she wanted to say. While moving on horseback sounded easier than walking, the rider needed to maintain their balance as the horse rocked up and down along the way to avoid falling off. It was a relatively taxing ordeal, and given that Sigrún was suffering from sharp pains across her entire body with every movement, a horse would be an excruciating animal to ride.

“That’s too dangerous. Let’s get a chariot. That would make things a little...”

“No. We don’t know when the Flame Clan Army will advance on the Holy Capital. They might even be pursuing our men as we speak. We can’t afford to move that slowly.”

While a chariot was substantially faster than marching by foot, it was much slower than horseback. Given that every minute was valuable, there was only one feasible choice.

“You might be right, but it would all be for naught if you fell from your horse and hurt yourself.”

“I’m prepared for that eventuality.”

If it really came down to it, Sigrún getting injured to the point of being unable to fight would be absolutely fine, so long as she made it to the capital. After all, it was no exaggeration to say that morale was the most decisive factor on the battlefield, and as Mánagarmr, her presence alone would be more than enough to boost the army’s morale substantially. She couldn’t bear the thought that trying to shield herself from potential injury could lead to her being late to arrive to the battle, which could very well lead to Yuuto being killed in her absence. With that in mind, the highest priority right now was for Sigrún, the woman the soldiers worshipped as the goddess of victory, to get to the Holy Capital.

“I’m going, no matter what. If I end up pushing myself so far that I cannot fight, then so be it.”

“Oh for... When it comes to His Majesty—to Father—you completely lose your head.” Hildegard scratched at her head in frustration. It seemed she had given up trying to persuade Sigrún to consider a different course.

“Fine, whatever. I get it. I’ll do something about it. That’s my job, right?”

With a sigh, Hildegard lifted Sigrún from Hildólfr’s back... Then tossed her into the air.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Sigrún said with a look of utter shock, but Hildegard then caught Sigrún on her back and carried her.

“I’ll carry you on my back. I can keep up with the unit’s march on foot,” Hildegard said with a tone of resigned exasperation and shook her head.

While she was smaller than Sigrún in stature, she boasted significantly greater physical abilities than her. Although the Steel Clan had a great number of Einherjar in its ranks, she was, without a doubt, one of the most physically

gifted. Hildegard was certainly more than capable of carrying Sigrún on her back while also maintaining pace with the Múspell Unit's march.

"Surely that must be difficult, even for you."

"It is. Honestly, I don't really want to do it. In fact, I already regret saying I would."

"That's fast!"

"But we've got no choice, have we? Since I'm the only one who can do this, I don't really have any say in the matter. It's a pain in the ass, and I really don't want to! I really don't want to do it!" Hildegard repeated her complaints as she expressed her displeasure with the situation. Sigrún couldn't help but chuckle at that.

"You've grown quite a bit," she said, deeply moved.

Ordinarily, the sight of someone whining this much wouldn't instill a belief that the person in question was mature by any stretch of the imagination, but it was worth remembering that when Hildegard had knocked on the door of the Múspells asking to join a little over a year earlier, she was horrendously self-absorbed and completely unable to think about anyone but herself. Hildegard had grown as a person to the point where she could now think of the needs of the Steel Clan and her mentor Sigrún. Sure, she was complaining, but she was volunteering to do something for someone other than herself. That was a huge improvement. What else could you call it?

"Hrmph. That's because you've done nothing but train me day in and day out, Mother Rún. So thanks to that, I've built up a stupid amount of energy," Hildegard pouted and said with a touch of snark. It seemed she hadn't quite grasped what Sigrún had really meant. It was, however, true that the combination of her hellish daily regimen of training and the fact that Hildegard was in the middle of a growth spurt meant she was also physically substantially stronger than she was a year ago.

"Okay, I'll leave it to you, then. I apologize for this, but I need to rely on you."

"Sure, whatever. I'll take care of it."

"Make sure you don't shake me that much. Also, if you can hold me lower

down, that would be much better. Ah, also...”

“You’re being awfully demanding!”

“That’s because it’s you holding me. Surely you can manage it, right?” Sigrún went out of her way to say with a taunting tone.

She had known her for over a year. Sigrún knew full well that this was the best way to motivate Hildegard to work harder.

“H-Hrmph! Of course! This is easy!”

As expected, Hildegard took the bait almost immediately. Sigrún chuckled affectionately at her adorable and easy-to-control little sister.



The battle between Hveðrungr, staff officer of the Steel Clan, and Homura, daughter of the Flame Clan patriarch, had started on the plains south of the Holy Capital of the Glaðsheimr. Sparks flew from Hveðrungr's nihontou and Homura's dagger as the pair clashed.

In combat involving weapons, engagement range was extraordinarily important. A common understanding was that it took three times as much skill to defeat an opponent with a sword whilst unarmed. While Homura wasn't unarmed, the dagger she wielded was only half the length of Hveðrungr's blade. Hveðrungr had an overwhelming advantage in terms of his weapon... Or so he should have, but once the battle had actually started, Homura was the one on the offensive.

"C'mon! If you're not gonna attack me, then I'm just gonna keep going!"

Homura swung her dagger as her whims dictated. There was no sort of form behind her attacks. She was just attacking as she liked, and there was no trace of logic or reason to her blows. The reason she was overwhelming a man as strong as Hveðrungr despite that was simply because of the sheer difference in their speeds.

A tone of irritation spilled from Hveðrungr's lips. His arms, legs, and clothing had already been struck multiple times. While it seemed he had somehow avoided taking a lethal wound, he hadn't been able to completely evade Homura's attacks.

"Hehe... How long will you last?" Homura said with a cruel smile.

Hveðrungr wasn't actually weak. In fact, Homura admitted that he was quite strong. Shiba was about the only one in the Flame Clan capable of defending against her to this extent. Now, as for Shiba, Homura had thought he had promise, however—

"Hahahah! I would certainly love to fight you at full strength in about five years, Lady Homura!" he had said to her. He had treated her as a child, so Homura had sworn she would never make him her lackey.

"Have you started to understand the extent of my power?"

"Yeah. I've gotten a good grasp now."

“So, gonna surrender? I won’t kill you if you’ll become my lackey!”

“Heh, kill me? There’s no way you can,” Hveðrungr said as he laughed derisively. Although he had been completely on the defensive in the battle so far, he still managed to maintain his cockiness.

“Not getting it yet, huh? You need a little more punishing!”

“I’d say the same about you.”

As they argued, they continued their exchange of blows. Homura still held the advantage. Hveðrungr was still fully occupied with his defense and was unable to get in any meaningful attacking blows. However, one thing had changed. Hveðrungr, who had been gritting his teeth until earlier, was now smiling.

It was now Homura’s turn to let out a cry of frustration. Homura had been completely on the offensive. Her opponent wasn’t able to keep up with her speed in the slightest. However, despite having inflicted multiple scratches on him, she hadn’t been able to land anything deep enough to slow him down. He kept avoiding her blows at the very last moment. No, wait... When was the last time she’d landed her dagger on his body? She hadn’t been able to connect a single blow for a while now.

“I’d been rather cautious until now despite you being a brat since you’re twin-runed, but I guess this is all you’re capable of,” Hveðrungr said as he smirked maliciously.

Even if she was a child, Homura understood that he was deliberately drawing parallels to the things she had said to him before the battle to mock her. She hated to be looked down upon more than anything else. She felt something snap inside her.

“Okay, no more nice Homura! DIE!”

She had been aiming for Hveðrungr’s arms and legs to try to disable him because he had promise, and she had wanted to make him her lackey, but her patience had reached its limits. She had no need for someone who mocked her despite being an inferior form of life. With a powerful murderous intent, she unleashed her dagger at his face and torso. The sound of steel against steel rang out.

“Oh. You’ve changed where you’re aiming, eh?”

Much to Homura’s chagrin, however, he easily blocked the blows as he continued to smirk that irritating smirk.

“Graaaaaah!”

Homura made her anger evident as she swung her dagger wildly.

“DIE DIE DIE!”

“Hah! Sorry, but you’re gonna have to try a little harder if you want to kill me.”

“You...! Wait, what?!”

The dagger that she had thrust out in anger suddenly slipped in a different direction than Homura had intended. It was as though she had slipped in the mud and had almost lost her footing. All she could feel was the weird sensation of being unable to get her feet under her and sliding in directions she didn’t want to go.

And then came the shudder...

A cold shiver ran up Homura’s spine as though someone had suddenly dropped snow onto her back. She saw Hveðrungr’s black mask out of the corner of her eye. The eyes behind his mask had no life behind them—only the cold, sharp embodiment of his murderous intent.

“Yah!”

Hveðrungr let loose a sharp war cry as his blade sliced through the air.

“Eep!”

She was going to die. The moment that thought ran through her mind, Homura jumped in the direction that she had been driven to. That decision had saved her life. Hveðrungr’s blade passed just over her head. She clearly felt a cutting wind pass over her scalp. Had she been even a fraction of a second slower in her decision, her head would have been split in twain.

“Nooooo!”

Her momentum carried her forward, and on her hands and knees, Homura

scurried away from Hveðrungr like a fleeing hare. She felt her heart pound painfully in her chest. It wasn't because of intense exercise. It was all from fear of death. Homura slowly, hesitantly, cautiously looked behind her. With a short cry, she turned away, every one of her features twitching in fear. Homura, with her twin runes, felt something that the ordinary person couldn't see. What stood before her was a void. No rage. No hatred. No fear. No resolve. Just pure, untamed murderous intent.

“Wh-What the heck...are you?!” Homura eked out through her chattering teeth.

Despite her overwhelming talent, she lacked any meaningful combat experience. While she had engaged in numerous mock battles against Flame Clan soldiers, this was essentially her first real battle. She had never witnessed the terrifying sight that was the murderous intent exuded by a truly great warrior.

“Tch. I thought I had her.”

Falling back into his regular stance after swinging his blade, Hveðrungr let out a disappointed sigh as he looked upon Homura. There was none of the derision or mockery from earlier present in his expression. He knew better than anyone that he could spare himself no allowance to look down upon a twin-runed opponent.

His entire attitude had been an act; a bluff to enrage his opponent—to force her to lose her head in the heat of battle and make her attacks easier to read, so he could catch her on the counter-attack when she overcommitted.

“Nothing is easy when it comes to twin runes, is it?”

Hveðrungr had maneuvered the girl right into his trap, and yet she had somehow managed to defy all reasonable expectations and avoid his attack. He had used the Willow Technique to force her to lose her footing and had unleashed what he had planned to be a killing blow, and yet all he had managed to do was cut off a few strands of her hair. The raw instinct that drove her to leap in the direction she had been forced into was something straight out of the Dólgprásir's playbook.

“I suppose she may *look* like a kitten, but she's still a tiger cub.”

He was forced to admit with a resigned sigh that Homura was going to be a difficult opponent to kill. In Hveðrungr's long experience in battle, the fastest opponent he had faced to date had been Sigrún whilst she was under the effects of the Realm of Godspeed. However, in terms of raw speed, Homura was clearly faster. That speed made her an extremely dangerous opponent in and of itself. If she had the training to combine that speed with an understanding of the mechanics of sword fighting, even he wouldn't be able to do anything against her.

"That said, a tiger cub is still just a cub. It may pose some threat, but it's certainly not unkillable."

Though he believed he would have never been able to best a monster like Steinþórr in single combat, he was sure that Homura was an opponent he could take down. Yes, she too may be a tiger, but she was still just a cub—powerless in comparison to a fully-grown tiger like Steinþórr.

"Better kill her before she matures into a tiger as fierce as him."

Hveðrungr dangled his sword at his side and quickly approached Homura. While he appeared defenseless, it was a calculated risk to invite her to attack.

He moved with a firm conviction based on what he had learned through watching Homura's movements in their initial exchange. Hveðrungr's greatest weapon, his observational skills, had allowed him to grasp the tells that Homura gave off before she moved to attack. The fact that he was able to detect when she was about to attack meant that no matter how quickly she might move, he was always completely ready to deal with any of her blows.

"Sniff, sniff..."

As Hveðrungr approached, the girl shied away from him with a look of sheer terror, her teeth chattering uncontrollably. It seemed the last blow had completely unnerved her.

"It all makes sense now. This must be the first time she's felt her impending death—that she's felt a truly murderous intent coming from an opponent."

Hveðrungr's lips quirked into a smile.

The girl cowered, frozen as though she were a deer in the headlights. It was a

common occurrence with those experiencing their first battle. In any given battle, the soldiers most likely to die were the ones who were finding themselves facing the reality of their potential end for the first time. The sudden exposure to the thick scent of death in the air and the sheer intensity of the hostility coming from all sides threw them into a panic, and they would either ignore orders and engage in reckless charges or end up freezing in place.

“I’ve been unlucky to this point, but it seems fortune’s finally smiling upon me.”

Hveðrungr thanked his luck to run into her at this stage in her life. It seemed that despite her strength, this girl had basically never been exposed to actual combat. Had she seen more combat before this encounter, he wouldn’t have been able to deal with her.

“Though things may be going well for me, it would seem that the same can’t be said for you.”

Had it been Sigrún or Skáviðr facing her, they might have hesitated in killing such a young girl. They may very well have been tempted to capture her and use her as a negotiating chip against the Flame Clan. Nobunaga was well known to care deeply about his own kin and make allowances for them that he wouldn’t for anyone else. Given she was named Homura and had black hair and black eyes—qualities that were extremely rare on Yggdrasil—she was likely the daughter of Nobunaga that had been mentioned in Kristina’s intelligence reports. That would have given the girl the chance to survive a battle against a powerful opponent, and she would have gained a priceless opportunity for personal growth.

Hveðrungr, however, was far more ruthless and driven by rational calculations than the aforementioned Mánagarmr. He had already come to the conclusion that it was best to kill Homura here and now. After all, it was impossible to keep a twin-runed opponent restrained for long. Homura would likely use some ludicrous method to escape her confinement, and driven by resentment, she would become a dangerous opponent in the future. With all of that in mind, Hveðrungr brought down his blade without hesitation or guilt.

“Guh!”

Just as he was about to land the killing blow, an explosion rang through the air, and Hveðrungr felt a sharp jolt slam into his left shoulder as he was thrown backward. Even through the pain, Hveðrungr recognized the sharp retort of an arquebus that had echoed through the air. Someone had shot him, but that wasn't the end of the attacks against him. A barrage of arrows soon followed the gunshot.

“Blast!”

Hveðrungr rolled backward to avoid the volley as he caught sight of an older man on horseback approaching with an escort of armed bodyguards, loosing arrows of his own at him all the while. The man's accuracy with his bow from atop a horse traveling at full gallop was impressive, but what caught Hveðrungr's attention was his black hair. There was only one man that could be.

“Daddy?!”

“Is that Nobunaga?!”

Homura and Hveðrungr shouted out at the same time. Even Hveðrungr was caught off guard at the sudden appearance of the Great Lord himself. Nobunaga rode over to Homura and smiled down at her.

“Ah, my dear Homura. Are you unhurt?”

Hveðrungr understood what Yuuto had meant when he said Nobunaga was attached to his kin and coddled them. Nobunaga had probably been watching his beloved daughter's first battle from a short distance away, ready to swoop in if she was in actual danger.

“Tch, the odds are a bit too lopsided now,” Hveðrungr spat out bitterly as he glared at the cavalymen gathered around Nobunaga. With the experience he had gathered over his many battles, Hveðrungr was capable of telling how powerful an opponent was simply by observing their slightest movements and their demeanor, and it was obvious to him with a mere glance that all of the cavalymen present were accomplished warriors worthy of serving as Nobunaga's bodyguards.

Of course, there was also the minor fact that he had been shot in his left shoulder. The shot had been a glancing blow, and Hveðrungr was still capable of

fighting, but as much as he hated to waste an opportunity to attack the enemy's supreme commander, even he had to admit it would be all but suicide to take on this many opponents alone as he bled profusely from his shoulder. In this particular instance, discretion was the better part of valor, and Hveðrungr quickly abandoned any thoughts of glory and switched over to figuring out how to escape. He reached into his breast to retrieve the item that would secure his retreat.

"Now, go and kill this insolent...Ah!"

Nobunaga paused mid-sentence and his expression tensed as he saw what Hveðrungr had retrieved from his pockets. It was somewhat smaller than the type Nobunaga was familiar with, but the ceramic orb could only be one thing...

"He's got a tetsuhau!"

Nobunaga and his bodyguards reacted exactly as Hveðrungr had hoped. Nobunaga immediately leaped off his horse and, after picking up Homura, attempted to jump to safety. His bodyguards hurriedly reined in their horses as they prepared for the blast from Hveðrungr's bomb.

"Nope, not quite."

Hveðrungr smirked and threw the orb against the ground. Smoke billowed outward as it struck the ground and shattered. It was a smoke bomb that Hveðrungr carried around for just this type of situation. As a cautious tactician, Hveðrungr made it a point to always have contingency plans before committing to any scheme.

"Tch! A smokescreen!" Nobunaga observed bitterly as Hveðrungr made a run for the horse he had kept close by for this exact kind of situation. By the time the smoke cleared, he had already mounted his horse and set off at a gallop.

"Don't let him go!"

"Chase him!"

"Heh, that's a mistake," Hveðrungr said with a malicious grin.

Nobunaga's bodyguards gave chase, filling the air with angry shouts. They were evidently unaware that Hveðrungr had been patriarch of the Panther Clan.

While the Panther Clan was now one of the member clans of the Steel Clan that made its home in western Álfheimr, when Hveðrungr had been at its head, they had been a nomadic clan of horse warriors based out of the Miðgarðr region.

“Guh!”

“Urk!”

Because of that ignorance, they were also unaware that the horse warriors of the Panther Clan had specialized in hit-and-run tactics using the Parthian Shot, the highly skilled art of firing backward at a chasing opponent on horseback. Two arrows, fired in rapid succession, brought down the first two cavalymen chasing after Hveðrungr, forcing their companions to slow their pursuit. Taking advantage of the opening, Hveðrungr spurred his horse into a full gallop and quickly disappeared from their view as though carried off by the wind.

“Enough! Let him go!”

Nobunaga stopped his bodyguards with a single barked command before they could set off after the retreating black-masked horseman. Nobunaga clearly recalled seeing that man on the battlefield before as the commander of a cavalry unit that was ferociously skilled in the art of horseback archery. They had been a difficult enemy to defeat, raining down arrows with powerful bows that outranged his army while making maximum use of their mobility on horseback. Nobunaga knew that chasing after the horseman would result in more casualties as he launched arrows backward at the troops that pursued him.

“...Yes, My Lord.”

“Understood, My Lord.”

While the troopers reined in their horses and gave up their pursuit, Nobunaga saw the frustration in their faces. Though the enemy was skilled, he was but a single horseman. It was maddening to see him escape after having killed two of their comrades.

“I understand your frustration at losing two of your comrades. But I ask that you swallow it. Your responsibility is to protect myself and Homura.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

It seemed they had regained their composure, and this time, there was no hesitation before they answered. They had realized that chasing after an enemy in a rage and leaving their liege and his daughter unprotected would be a foolish abdication of their responsibilities. Still, it was only because they were assigned to be his bodyguards that they had obeyed his order. Nobunaga knew that even he would have struggled to rein in their anger had they been ordinary soldiers.

Nobunaga couldn't help but admire the malicious genius behind the Parthian Shot. It was extremely difficult for a commander to stop his soldiers once they were overcome by the thrill of victory and rage. The Parthian Shot took advantage of that fact to draw soldiers into a killing zone even as the horsemen feigned retreat.

“I see now. He must also be the one who concocted this suicide rear guard strategy.”

Nobunaga nodded to himself, as though the pieces had finally fallen into place in some sort of mental puzzle. The Parthian Shot and the suicide rear guard had both been created by a man who understood how people reacted and had no qualms about manipulating them. The shared traits of those two tactics made it clear to him that it had been the masked man who had come up with both plans.

“Hveðrungr, formerly of the Panther Clan, if I recall. He may be serving the Steel Clan now, but I can see how he was able to raise a great clan during his own reign. An impressive man.”

Nobunaga was particularly impressed by the fact that Hveðrungr held no reservations about using whatever means were required to obtain his desired ends. Most in the world would condemn such an attitude as dishonorable. It was also hardly an outlook that was likely to garner a positive reputation. But the world wasn't a gentle place where things could be accomplished solely by honorable means.

Nobunaga believed that what was most important was the dedication to achieve one's goals regardless of what that required. To him, it wasn't those

with the greatest dreams that accomplished great feats in the world. It was those with the dedication and the unwavering commitment to do whatever it took, however underhanded and dirty, to achieve those feats. That was particularly true if the goal was conquest of the known world.

“H-He’s nothing! Nothing at all!” Homura said with a trembling voice and a complete lack of conviction. She was huddled in place, as though her legs had given out from under her, and her face was still pale with terror.

“In spite of all that, it seems he got the better of you, huh?”

“I-I just let my guard down a little! Next time I’ll... I’ll...!”



The moment she shouted out in defiance, a tremor went up Homura's body, and she fell silent with a sob. It seemed the thought of a 'next time' made her imagine fighting that man again. Once again, Nobunaga was impressed by Hveðrungr, admiring the fact he had so thoroughly terrified a twin-runed Einherjar.

"Heh. It was certainly a gamble, but one that seems to have paid off."

As he watched his beloved daughter tremble, Nobunaga smiled inwardly.

The suicide tactics of the rear guard had given Nobunaga the conviction that a real warrior was among them, someone who was capable of instilling the fear of the gods in Homura's mind. Hveðrungr had done exactly what Nobunaga had hoped.

Even without Nobunaga's favoritism for his beloved daughter, Homura was an extremely capable and promising girl. She was everything one would believe a prodigy would be. Not only did she have the superhuman physical abilities of a twin-runed Einherjar, but she also was an extremely quick learner, had the sharp senses to notice things that others missed, and the smarts to make use of those skills. All this and she was still only ten years old.

There was, however, one thing that had concerned Nobunaga. It was the simple fact that Homura was too gifted, too talented—too much of a prodigy. Nobunaga had seen countless talented people throughout his lifetime. Those who had a gift for fighting from childhood and stood head and shoulders above their peers when it came to learning the art of fighting. But he had also seen them fail. He had seen those gifted youngsters freeze when faced with actual battle; watched them panic in the face of death. They'd fail to achieve anything and die without ever making use of their talent. That was exactly why Nobunaga had wanted Homura to experience real battle, and the fear that came with it, for herself.

"Let it go, let it go. That man's made for war. No matter how often you try, you're not going to defeat him," Nobunaga went out of his way to say harshly to his beloved daughter in order to break her arrogance. While Nobunaga was gentle toward his kin—particularly his children—Homura was a child who had the character and the talent to become the next ruler of the Flame Clan. He

needed to instill in her the discipline she would need to take his place before he was gone and it was all left to her. Before she needed to survive on her own.

“Sniff... Th-That’s not true! I-I’ll never ever lose to him again! B-Beating him’ll be easy!”

Even as Homura shied away at her father’s harsh words, she found the courage to insist that she would win next time. She was probably driven by a desire not to disappoint her beloved father. Even so, she was still just a child, and Nobunaga saw right through the fact that she was putting on a brave face for his sake.

“No, you won’t be able to. He approaches battle with a different level of commitment.”

“Commit...ment...?”

“Yes. You’re certainly a good daughter. But because you’re too good, you don’t know what it means to lose. You’re too accustomed to winning, to have things go easily. The confidence that comes from that sort of easy victory is a fragile thing. It crumbles the moment it faces an actual challenge. Just like you have now.”

Homura gazed downward, sobbing with frustration at Nobunaga’s critique. She was probably painfully aware of how weak and fragile her heart was. She had yet to stand up. She was still trembling from fear.

“However, darling, that’s what makes this experience such a blessing,” Nobunaga said with a softer tone after making certain that Homura had been adequately humbled.

Harshness alone wasn’t enough to push a person to grow. After sixty years of life, Nobunaga was more than aware that it took a combination of honey and vinegar to properly motivate and teach people. Nobunaga understood Homura’s frame of mind and applied the necessary kindness at precisely the right moment.

“Huh?”

“Face your fear and be able to control it. Use this humiliation as fuel to drive you. Never be satisfied with yourself, and always know you have much to learn.

If you can remember that, you will never lose to anyone,” Nobunaga smiled gently and said to his daughter as she blinked in surprise.

He truly appreciated the masked man’s work. This was a lesson that no amount of words could teach. Even if he wanted to educate her through experience, neither he nor Shiba could convincingly teach her a fear of death. At the same time, there were few enemies who could actually inspire fear in Homura. The masked man’s skill and his cold, ruthless demeanor had been the perfect combination.

“No doubt you’re frustrated, you’re humiliated. No doubt you never want to experience this again. But it’s only when you overcome these things that you’ll truly begin your journey to becoming a true warrior,” Nobunaga gripped his hand into a fist and said with fierce conviction.

In Nobunaga’s book, those who relied upon their talents and took them for granted were second-rate. There were heights that couldn’t be reached through talent alone. There was a world that only those who experienced the bitterness of failure and yet overcame those setbacks without breaking could enter. Homura was finally at the entrance to that world. Whether or not Homura would overcome her fear or be broken by it was all up to her. All he could do was give her a push in the right direction. But Nobunaga had no doubt about the outcome. After all, she was his greatest accomplishment—the child that he knew was worthy of being his successor.

“Let us go, Homura. Avenging your humiliation is something you need to do for yourself!”

“O-Okay!”

Homura nodded without hesitation at Nobunaga’s encouragement. There was a strong resolve in her eyes, even as her face was still pale from the lingering fear and her body still trembled. She would overcome her fear. Nobunaga smiled as that conviction grew within him. He was no longer concerned about what would happen when he was gone. It meant that he could now pour all of his effort into the war ahead—a venture which he was willing to give his body and soul in order to allow it to succeed.

ACT 6

“I’m glad you’ve returned safely.”

The þjóðann himself greeted Hveðrungr with open arms at the front gate to Valaskjálf Palace after receiving word of the man’s return to Glaðsheimr. It was a fitting welcome, given what Hveðrungr had accomplished, but Hveðrungr himself looked extremely displeased at the greeting.

“That’s quite enough. It’s creepy.”

“Ouch, that’s rather pointed of you. C’mon, I can do this much, right?”

“I can’t help but think I’m walking into a trap when you come out with a smile.”

“No need to be so harsh!”

“So, what is it you’re scheming?”

“I’m not scheming!” Yuuto said indignantly. He had come out with the sole intention of giving the brave commander of his army’s rear guard his heartfelt gratitude, so he found Hveðrungr’s suspicion and sarcasm hard to bear. Then again, he and Hveðrungr had a lot of history—a rather storied and checkered history, so Yuuto understood where Hveðrungr was coming from.

“Do you intend to fight an army of a hundred thousand without any schemes in mind?”

“Oh, that’s what you meant.”

“What else could I have meant?”

Hveðrungr curled his lips into a teasing smile that informed Yuuto that he had just been had. Then again, there was the possibility that Hveðrungr was just trying to hide his embarrassment at the warm greeting. Yuuto found it frustrating, but he knew that Hveðrungr was an irascible cynic at the best of times. He probably couldn’t bear a genuinely friendly welcome home without trying to deflect away some of the warmth with a sarcastic quip or two.

“You mentioned you intended to face them here, but it doesn’t look like this place is going to be much use as a fortress,” Hveðrungr said skeptically as he glanced at the ruins that remained of the palace’s crumbled walls.

The earthquake had been strong enough to destroy Gjallarbrú Fortress and its roman concrete walls. Even accounting for the fact that Gjallarbrú had suffered damage from the sustained bombardment from the Flame Clan’s artillery, it had been an extremely damaging earthquake, and Glaðsheimr, which wasn’t located all that far away, had suffered terribly from the quake. The giant fortifying walls that had surrounded the Holy Capital had almost completely collapsed and were of no use in keeping out enemy forces. Nearly eighty percent of Valaskjálf Palace, the largest palace in all of Yggdrasil, had collapsed. The rubble that remained in its place bore no resemblance to its former splendor.

Yuuto smiled confidently in spite of the fact that he was as aware of the damage as Hveðrungr. “More than you’d think, actually.”

Hveðrungr raised a brow in curiosity. Glaðsheimr had completely ceased to function as a fortification, providing none of the height advantages that fortified walls ordinarily gave defenders. Without the benefit of a higher line of sight or increased range for arrows, the typical adage that it took several times the number of attackers to defeat a defending army inside a fortification was clearly not going to apply.

“You’re saying you can stop the Flame Clan’s army of a hundred thousand with this pile of rubble?”

“Yeah. Not only that. I’ll be able to destroy them, in fact. I can certainly do enough damage to make it so that they can’t attack for a while.”

“What?!” Hveðrungr’s expression tensed at Yuuto’s statement. Hveðrungr had fought against Nobunaga on the battlefield as a commander. He knew from bitter experience how dangerous an opponent Nobunaga was in war.

“...Can you really do it?”

“Well, it’d be a challenge to beat that man in a straight-up fight, but this is my backyard.”

Yuuto tapped his foot against the ground. Yuuto had spent countless hours since his loss at the previous Battle of Glaðsheimr contemplating how he could defeat Nobunaga. The hours passed fruitlessly, and he had spent his days fretting over the problem, but recently he had come up with a single solution: a war plan that could only be executed here in the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr, and one that only Yuuto could bring to fruition. Yuuto's face took on an expression of grim determination, and he held up his fist.

"I'll do it. If it's a wall I can't climb, then I'll use whatever I need to, cheating or not, to break through it."

"This is the Holy Capital? There's no trace of its former glory."

Several days after Hveðrungr's return to Glaðsheimr, the Flame Clan Army under Nobunaga's command laid eyes upon the Holy Capital for the first time in several months. The city had completely changed in the intervening months. The great earthquake had completely destroyed the great walls that had surrounded the city, and the rubble from the fallen walls had been left scattered where it had landed.

"So, this is how it ends for the city that flourished for two centuries as the greatest in all of Yggdrasil. I suppose all good things must come to an end. It reminds me of Kyoto of old."

Nobunaga chuckled wryly at the bitter irony.

Kyoto, despite its name as the Thousand-Year Capital, had, by Nobunaga's time, been completely reduced to a shadow of its former glory in the aftermath of the Onin Rebellion, and looked little better than a populated ruin. The center of the city, the area around Nijo Oji, bore no resemblance to the flourishing population center it was meant to be, and by the time Nobunaga had made his visit to the capital, it looked like an overgrown rural landscape. There were still technically areas that could be described as urban, but it was restricted to tiny parts of the city in Kamikyo, north of the current Ichijo Street, and the area called Shimokyo between Sanjo Street and Gojo Street.

The emperor, supposedly the ruler of all of the Land of the Rising Sun, had been left utterly penniless, and the Imperial Household struggled to raise the

necessary funds to conduct important ceremonies such as abdication or funerals. Emperor Go-Tsuchimikado's body had lain in the palace for over forty days after his death, while his successor, Emperor Go-Kashiwabara's coronation ceremony had only taken place twenty-two years after he had first taken the Chrysanthemum Throne.

"Well, if anything, this is for the best. I'm tired of dealing with fools whose heads are so filled with tradition and formality that they can't even see the world in front of their eyes."

Nobunaga furrowed his brow sourly as he remembered how much of a pain it had been to deal with the old noble families of Kyoto, those parasites whose only accomplishments in life were to have been born as the descendant of someone who had accomplished great feats decades, even centuries ago, and clung stubbornly to their decrepit and moldering traditions. The ingrates that had begged him for financial support, only to turn around and rebel against him when they had regained a semblance of authority. They had all been utterly worthless.

Nobunaga had no use for traditions that fostered and coddled such wastrels, no wish for the moldering city that they inhabited. But the process of destroying those old ways and tearing down the old cities required money and labor, and more than anything, brought about resentment from the people. In that sense, with everything already destroyed, nature had done the hard work and saved Nobunaga the cost and effort.

"So, it begins."

Nobunaga heard a voice from behind, and he broke out into a grin as he turned around. "Ah, Ran. Are your wounds healed?"

"Yes. I apologize for causing you concern, My Lord. Some parts of me still ache, but that will not impact my ability to fulfill my duties."

"Your loyalty is to be praised. Don't push yourself too hard though. You're the only one I can trust Homura to when I'm gone."

No matter what he accomplished, no matter where he went, Nobunaga would be an annarr in Yggdrasil. His black-haired, black-eyed appearance—the simple difference between him and the people around him—meant that

everyone still drew a line at which they considered him an outsider. Regardless of whether it was desired or not, so long as the nature of people remained unchanged, that tendency would stay with them. That was the true sin that all of humanity shouldered.

“For good or for ill, Homura was also born into this world with the same black hair and black eyes as us. Furthermore, she was born with twin runes. No one understands her, and she has no one she can trust as an equal. That will be her fate in life.”

Nobunaga peered far into the future and showed pity upon the tragic truth that would define his daughter’s life. Nobunaga himself had thoroughly destroyed such discrimination when it stood in his way and climbed his way within Yggdrasil’s society. But that had hardly been an easy path to walk, and he didn’t want his beloved daughter to have to deal with the same challenges.

“So long as you live, at least in terms of appearance, she won’t be alone.”

People rarely felt loneliness when they were truly by themselves; it was only when they were among a large group of people that they felt the strength of isolation.

“Stay alive, Ran. Above all else, you’re not allowed to die. That’s the order you must prioritize above all else. Understood?”

“...Yes. I understand, My Lord.”

“I know I ask a great amount of you. I trust you to see this through.”

“I will do it, even at the cost of my life.”

“Fool. I just told you not to die!” With a dry laugh, Nobunaga lightly and playfully smacked Ran on the head.

“Hah, my apologies, My Lord. A slip of the tongue.”

Ran rubbed at his head with an embarrassed laugh. Of course, Nobunaga was aware that Ran had used the phrasing on purpose. Ran had been almost deviously attentive, even as a squire. There was no way that such an intelligent and thoroughly thoughtful man who paid heed to the comfort of everyone around him would make such a thoughtless slip of the tongue. He had

purposefully used that phrasing as a joke to lighten the somber mood.

“Heh. Well, let us put off the future for now and focus on what’s in front of us.”

“Yes, My Lord. If we spend too long looking into the distance, we might very well trip on a stone at our feet.”

“Indeed. Though this is a rather large stone.”

Nobunaga let out an amused chuckle. According to his spies, the Steel Clan Army of thirty thousand was still garrisoned within the city of Glaðsheimr, an odd situation given that these ruins were essentially worthless as a fortification now that it had been stripped of its walls. Did he intend to accept his loss and share the fate of the Holy Capital? No, that wasn’t like him at all.

“So, let’s see what you’ve got. This will be our final battle. Don’t disappoint me, Suoh Yuuto.”

“So, they’re finally here,” Yuuto said casually, listening to the report of an enemy sighting as he took a bite from a piece of jerky. There was no trace of panic or fear in his voice; he seemed exceptionally calm despite the arrival of the Flame Clan Army—the very same that had defeated his own forces twice before and now numbered a hundred thousand.

“And what of their movements?”

“I’m told they’re setting up their encampment, digging ditches, and putting up their tents, Your Majesty.”

“I see. Got it. You’re dismissed. Let me know if there are any new developments.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” the messenger standing at attention said crisply before making his way out of the room.

“So, this is really happening, huh,” Yuuto said with a long, deep sigh after he confirmed the soldier had left the room. A supreme commander could never afford to show any weakness in front of his soldiers, hence his display of nonchalance, but despite the fact he had known ahead of time that the Flame

Clan Army was approaching, their actual arrival still weighed on his mind.

“Yes, they’ve finally arrived,” Felicia, who was standing next to him, said with a hard, tense expression. She knew just how much of a threat the Flame Clan, and Nobunaga in particular, were in Yuuto’s eyes. Her anxiety was understandable. Still, Yuuto had no intention of feigning nonchalance in front of her. He knew from experience that keeping up such a facade was not only exhausting, but that it was likely it would crack at a critical moment. Yuuto wanted to take off that mask and air out his anxieties when he was alone with a woman he loved.

“I would have preferred if we had a little more time.”

According to the report he had received from Alexis through his divine mirror, Linnea and the others had defeated the attacking Flame Clan Army at lárnvíðr and had already dispatched reinforcements to help relieve the Holy Capital. Yuuto had almost felt his heart stop when he’d heard Sigrún had been missing for several days after the flood of the Körmt River, but she had returned safely to lárnvíðr, having slain the great general Shiba. She, too, was heading toward Glaðsheimr with her own forces and would arrive before the men Linnea had sent.

Yuuto’s hope had been that, at the very least, Sigrún and her Múspell Unit, the most elite unit of the Steel Clan and a symbol of victory for the entire clan, would arrive before the Flame Clan did. He needed every able body he could muster. Unfortunately, time had favored Nobunaga over Yuuto on this occasion.

“Well, no use griping over what I can’t fix. Besides, Big Bro bought me more than enough time.”

Since Yuuto and Felicia were alone in the tent, there was no issue with him referring to Hveðrungr as his big brother. While Yuuto was now Hveðrungr’s superior as far as Chalice oaths were concerned, Hveðrungr would become his older brother-in-law when he formally married Felicia, so technically there was no issue with him referring to Hveðrungr as “big bro.”

“Man, Big Bro’s amazing. His ruthlessness and ability to execute cold, logical plans in emergencies is something I don’t have. Honestly, I’m a bit jealous of

him,” Yuuto said with a weak, self-deprecating laugh. Ruling required making hard decisions, and at times, it was necessary to discard the few for the good of the whole. Certainly, his years in Yggdrasil and experience with the brutal dog-eat-dog world it was had hardened Yuuto and given him the ability to make some harsh decisions, but...

“Sure, I show off in front of Big Bro and the others, but honestly, I’m shivering right now. I really hate the kind of person I am.”

He knew that, as someone born and raised in the peaceful society of modern Japan, he lacked the ruthless edge of people like Nobunaga or Hveðrungr. Yuuto knew that he wasn’t able to be as ruthless as he needed to be, and he keenly felt that weakness now. He had never grown accustomed to using war as anything other than a last resort. He constantly felt disgusted with needing to give orders to kill people. He was afraid of death, and he was even more afraid of losing his beloved companions.

“I do have a plan. A plan that has no equal—perhaps the best I’ve ever come up with. I’m confident that it’ll get results, but then I remember that I’m fighting *the* Oda Nobunaga.”

When Fárbaudi had left him as patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Yuuto dove into Nobunaga’s life and history to use as one of the models for his own rule. The thing that stood out most when looking into Nobunaga’s life was his remarkable ability to make decisions in desperate situations.

The Battle of Okehazama.

The Battle of Kanegasaki.

The Battle of Tenno-ji.

They had all been battles that threatened the very existence of the Oda Clan, but Nobunaga had come up with novel and innovative solutions on the fly and executed them without hesitation.

“Will it work on him? What if it doesn’t? What happens to the Steel Clan then? What about my people? My family? I keep thinking of new things to worry about, and I feel like I’m going to go crazy from all of the anxiety,” Yuuto said, cradling his head in his hands. Had it just involved his own future, he

wouldn't be this worried, but he shouldered the fates of over a million people now. For Yuuto, who wasn't even twenty years old yet, that was far too heavy of a burden to carry.

"Heh... In the end, I'm just a coward who used cheats to create situations where I could always win and only fought when I knew it was safe. I end up a nervous wreck the moment I'm faced with a battle I'm not sure I can win."

Yuuto looked down at his trembling palm and spat the words out bitterly. He understood better than anyone that with the army's most senior commander in this state, even a typically winnable battle couldn't be won. His mind understood that, but his body wouldn't stop trembling, and his heart wouldn't stop worrying.

"Dammit, if I have the time to be cowering here, I should be out there rallying the troops..."

"Big Brother..." Felicia's words of concern pulled Yuuto out of his spiral of self-loathing.

"Oh, sorry. You don't need to hear all this."

Yuuto let out a weak laugh. He hadn't meant to lay his thoughts out in the open like this. He didn't want her to see him so weak. However, by the time he'd realized what he was doing, he had given voice to all of the emotions that had been swirling inside him. It wasn't as though telling her would change anything, but he couldn't help but lean on her in this moment of weakness. He wanted her to share his anxiety and help him shoulder the burden. If he kept carrying it alone, he felt he'd be crushed by it.

"No need to apologize. If anything, it makes me happy to hear such things from you."

"Huh? Happy?"

Given that Yuuto had been worried that he'd disappointed her with his rambling confession, he blinked when he heard her unexpected answer.

"Yes. I'm glad that you're finally airing those thoughts to me, too. I'd been jealous of Big Sister Mitsuki and Lady Linnea until now because of it," Felicia said and puffed out her cheeks in a teasing pout.

There had always been a part of Yuuto that had been a bit more reserved with Felicia than with Mitsuki or Linnea. Felicia had, in the past, viewed him as the servant of Angrboða—the Gleipsieg—sincerely revering him as a divine figure. While that view of him had faded as it had been replaced with romantic affection, and he had let down his guard somewhat by allowing her to see him demotivated or sad, he had still felt a strong reluctance to let her see him afraid or weak. It seemed she had picked up on that reluctance, as well as the fact that he treated her a bit differently than his other wives, and had hoped he would be more open with her.

“Please don’t underestimate me. I won’t be disappointed by something as trivial as this.”

“Trivial, you say?” Yuuto said with a forced smile. He had been regretting the embarrassing amount of insecurity he had been showing through his statements, but it seemed that none of it bothered Felicia in the slightest.

“Yes, trivial. While we may not have conducted the ceremony yet, I consider myself one of your wives, Big Brother. It is a wife’s role to support her husband when he’s worried, depressed, or struggling, is it not?” Felicia said with a gentle smile.

“Yeah... You’re right. Sorry,” Yuuto said apologetically, as he realized that he’d let his old impressions of Felicia color his interactions with her. Back when they had been in the Wolf Clan, Felicia, while seemingly outgoing and friendly, had a certain fragility as she shouldered a great deal of internalized guilt and remorse. But lately, she had grown into a stronger, more confident woman with more emotional flexibility. Given how much she had changed for the better, it was understandable that she’d be dissatisfied at the fact that Yuuto still doubted her ability to cope with his weakness.

“But it does bring back memories... Hehe.”

Yuuto blinked in confusion as Felicia gazed off into the distance, chuckling as she seemed to be thinking about the past. He had no idea what she was talking about.

“About what? I have too many memories with you. I mean, we’ve been together all this time,” Yuuto decided to simply ask. Given how much weakness

he had shown, there was no point in putting on another act.

“That’s true. So much has happened that I probably do need to be more specific. I’m talking about your first battle, the Siege of Iárnviðr.”

“Oh, right. That.”

It wasn’t a pleasant memory for Yuuto. It was the battle that had turned him from a mere boy to a patriarch. A battle that had resulted in him losing his sworn father, Fárbauti, and his big brother, Loptr. At the same time, it had been the catalyst that would eventually make him into the man he was now.

“You had been trembling about the prospect of your first battle, Big Brother.”

“You really do remember things I’d rather forget,” Yuuto said with a slight grimace. Even if he was willing to accept that it was okay for him to show her his more vulnerable side, he still didn’t want a woman he loved to see him in that state, never mind have her clearly remember it.

“I remember every moment I’ve spent with you, Big Brother.”

“Uh-huh...”

“Do you remember, Big Brother? What I told you at the time?”

“Hm? ...Ah, yeah, I do remember.”

Yuuto searched his memories and soon came upon a particular phrase—words that were well suited for the current situation.

“A general may show weakness on occasion. They need not always show courage. Something like that, right?”

“What...? No, what I said was...”

Felicia looked confused, prompting Yuuto to burst out in laughter.

“Hah! I know exactly what you said. I’m just messing with you. Those were words attributed to a great hero that I once read. Their meaning is about the same as what you said though, I suppose. If I’m remembering it right, you said, ‘A great general must be both cautious and prudent. In fact, a small measure of cowardice is perfectly appropriate. It serves as proof of your potential as a commander.’ Was that it?”

“Y-Yes, exactly! You know, Big Brother, you can be quite mean at times!” Felicia said with a pout. Of course, what he’d said wasn’t *exactly* right, but he remembered clearly how she had helped encourage him when he was afraid before his first battle. At the time, he had dismissed her words as misplaced confidence in his abilities, but he remembered his own surprise when later, he found that Cao Cao of Wei, one of the heroes of the Three Kingdoms Period, had said something similar in his own writings.

“Well, yeah, I guess you’re right. A commander might as well be a bit cowardly sometimes.” Yuuto felt his heart lighten as soon as he uttered the words. He had learned quite a lot in his four and a half years in Yggdrasil. Too much, perhaps. He had forgotten about that saying up until this very moment.

“Precisely. It’s a lot better for a commander to be a careful and cautious person, rather than someone who acts recklessly and throws caution to the wind to gain a short-term advantage,” Felicia responded in reassurance.

With an army numbering over fifty thousand, the Steel Clan had a large number of commanders and generals in its ranks. The ones Yuuto found the most difficult to employ weren’t the cautious or cowardly ones. Instead, the ones who caused him the most headaches were the ones who either believed themselves to be great heroes or wanted to become heroes and repeatedly tried to employ reckless and dangerous tactics in a quest for glory. It was an easy flaw to see in others, but Yuuto had completely lost sight of it when it came to himself. He had been so caught up in his sense of responsibility as a ruler, his image of what a ruler should be, that he had narrowed his own perspective. That was part of what made ruling such a difficult responsibility.

“Thanks, Felicia. I feel like I have my feet under me again.”

He was still anxious. He was still scared. But now that he had stopped pretending to be something he wasn’t, his mind felt more at ease.

“Well, I was never worried about that in the slightest. You had been praising my brother and Nobunaga earlier, but if you ask me, I think that your decisions get better in tougher situations. As far as I’m concerned, you have everything needed in a general.”

“You think so...?”

The words didn't quite click with him, and Yuuto responded with a touch of skepticism.

"Yes. For example, the whole thing you mentioned earlier about only fighting battles you can win. What's wrong with putting in the effort to make sure you can secure a win? If anything, that's the very definition of a great general, is it not?"

"W-Well, sure..." Yuuto responded, still not entirely sold on Felicia's praise of him.

"Of course, you can lead our armies in a way that avoids danger as much as reasonably possible, but even that doesn't prevent dangerous situations from cropping up, does it?"

"I suppose you're right, yeah."

No matter how much planning he had put in before a battle, no matter how thoroughly he removed any possibility of defeat on paper, the actual battles were often filled with unexpected and unknowable variables. That had led to threats to his very person more than once. When he hadn't realized that Hveðrungr and Steinþórr had entered into an alliance and he had been suddenly flanked, he could very easily have lost, while in the battle against the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance, the battle had been a constant back and forth where the possibility of defeat constantly kept flashing in his mind.

"But, did you ever lose heart and cower in those moments of danger? If anything, you fought bravely," Felicia stated proudly.

"I guess?"

During those times of danger, Yuuto had been so caught up in turning back the tide of battle that he didn't really remember how he had felt in the moment, but that spoke to the fact that his attention had been solely focused on the battle itself. Perhaps he was braver than he thought. He felt his confidence revive within him. Felicia's words had been the impetus, but words alone weren't enough to touch the heart. The words had resonated with him because he had traveled the hard roads and built up the necessary experience.

"I can only be myself, huh? I guess you're right. No use wishing for something

I don't have."

Yuuto was, in fact, a man who was too compassionate to abandon the values he had grown up with in modern Japan. There was no denying that fact. But those values were also what had allowed Yuuto to see things that others could not. The very feats he had accomplished in Yggdrasil were testament to that fact.

His doubt was gone. Yuuto shouted at the top of his lungs. To rally himself; to convince himself.

"All right! Let's do this, Felicia! Third time's the charm. I'll show Nobunaga a thing or two!"

"So, the morning has come," Nobunaga murmured to himself, watching as the eastern sky began to lighten. He hadn't been able to sleep the night before. Nobunaga knew that the coming battle would decide who ruled this continent.

"I'm over sixty years old, and I'm acting like a child before a festival."

He chuckled self-deprecatingly to himself, but there was no denying his own excitement. It had been fifty years since he had decided that, having been born a man, he would bring all lands beneath the heavens under his control. The fervent wish that he had spent his entire life chasing was almost in reach. Only a dead man would have been unmoved by that prospect.

"Ran, how are we positioned?" Nobunaga asked without turning around, his gaze fixed on his quarry, the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr.

"Twenty thousand have been assigned to the east, west, and north. All they await are your orders, My Great Lord."

"I see," Nobunaga replied and nodded.

Nobunaga's guiding principle was rapid decisions, rapid execution, and rapid victory. He had no intention of letting the war go on any longer than was necessary. He had made certain to surround Glaðsheimr with his forces—he was going to end it here. He wanted to foreclose the possibility of Yuuto and the Steel Clan Army escaping eastward into the Silk Clan territories at all costs.

“Then let us begin. Vassar!”

“Yes, yes, you called?”

A rather unexceptional and unmotivated-looking middle-aged man with drooping eyelids stepped out when summoned. Vassar was a nickname Nobunaga had given him because his full name had been hard for Nobunaga to pronounce. The man’s full name was Vassarfall. His appearance had none of the energy or demeanor expected of a great general, but despite that surface observation, he was in fact one of the Five Flame Clan Division Commanders, standing alongside Ran, Shiba, Kuuga, and Old Man Salk.

“As always, the vanguard is yours. Understood?”

“Of course. So it is finally my turn...”

Vassarfall smiled as though he had been waiting eagerly for the news. The battles between the Flame Clan and the Steel Clan to this point had mostly been skirmishes around sieges, and the only major field battle had been the first Battle of Glaðsheimr. He had been granted few opportunities to make use of his strengths, and it seemed he was champing at the bit for a chance to fight.

“Indeed it is. Given the circumstances, it’s only logical that I employ your skills.”

“Well, true. But I’m not going to work for free. If I can get you Suoh Yuuto’s head, can I have the item I’ve been asking for all these years?”

While his tone was technically formal and respectful, his attitude toward Nobunaga was casual and relaxed. Ran, who was standing next to Nobunaga, twitched a brow but remained silent. He was perfectly aware that it was no use chastising Vassarfall. Nobunaga chuckled softly and shook his head in an exaggerated manner.

“The battle hasn’t started yet, and already you’re asking for your reward?”

“I’ll be much more motivated if I know I’ll get the thing I want.”

“A fine point. Very well. If you can take Suoh Yuuto’s head, I’ll reward you with the Glass Goblet crafted by the great artisan Ingrid.”

“You will? Truly?!”

“The word of a Nobunaga is absolute.”

“Thank you so much! I’m totally pumped now!”

“You really are a glib fellow.”

Nobunaga curled his lips into a faintly exasperated but amused smile. This man was so accomplished as a general that within the Flame Clan, he was known as Vassarfall, Master of Advance and Retreat, but he was also infamous as an eccentric who was obsessed with collecting curios of various sorts. He would part with however much silver was necessary for him to acquire items he coveted. He was so irresponsible in his spending that within Nobunaga’s inner circle, he was often derided as a man who could read the flow of combat on a battlefield practically perfectly but had no idea when to stop when it came to his hobbies. The anecdote where he turned down the Wind Clan territories and asked Nobunaga for the Glass Goblet was well known among members of the Flame Clan.

“Heed this advice. If you allow your mind to fill up with thoughts of the Glass Goblet, you might very well trip over something you miss at your feet,” Nobunaga stated, before returning his focus to the more pressing topic. “A messenger arrived earlier from Bilskírnir. The Second and Fifth Divisions advancing on the west have been destroyed, and it seems Shiba has been slain by the Steel Clan’s Mánagarmr.”

“Wha?! Shiba’s dead?!”

Vassarfall, whose face had been so animated at the prospect of winning a prize he had sought for so long, suddenly lost its cheer and his expression tensed. He and Shiba were close in age, and they had fought countless battles at one another’s side as division commanders. He, perhaps better than anyone else, knew Shiba’s strength, which was why news of his death struck him all the harder.

“Yes. I had briefly thought it was a false report to sow confusion in our ranks, but it appears to be true.”

“Hrm, that’s pretty hard to believe, though. I mean, he wasn’t the most pleasant man to hang around with, but he was an exceptionally powerful warrior.”

“Indeed. His loss comes as a great blow. I had intended for him to teach his fighting arts to the next generation in the world I’m about to make.”

“Oh, man... That may not have been the most ideal choice, however. He’s the sort of teacher that’ll quickly burn out his students. Of course, the ones that could keep up with him would become monsters, but that’d leave maybe one or two students at most.”

“Hrmph, I have no interest in the weak and the ordinary.”

“Of course. I’d almost forgotten. But, wait, if the Fifth Division’s gone, what happened to Kuuga? I mean, he’s the sort of man who’d pop back up even if you were sure you’d lopped off his head.”

“He betrayed me.”

“Wha?!” Vassarfall said with complete befuddlement. He was ordinarily a man who was hard to read with his languid air and discursive rambles, but it seemed the news had, again, caught him by surprise.

“According to the reports, the defeat of our western forces was due to Kuuga’s betrayal.”

“I see now...”

Vassarfall’s face puckered sourly before he let out a soft snort of derision. The news had initially shocked him, but it seemed he’d made a connection in his mind.

“What is it? Had you noticed something?”

“Yes, somewhat. He’s the sort who dwells on things, and he was carrying around a lot of unvented resentment.”

“Indeed. I had thought he was a tenacious man, but it seems he wasn’t fit to walk my path of conquest. Worthless in the end,” Nobunaga said without amusement. He was used to being betrayed by his subordinates. As far as he was concerned, they were simply men who couldn’t see the big picture, who couldn’t set aside the possibility of great rewards and feats by following him. Instead, they would get caught up in trivial matters that were of no import. He had no interest in such rabble. “I suppose it’s worth praising our opponent. No

doubt the Steel Clan had worked hard to get him to defect. They saw the chink in our armor and took great advantage of it. The man we face isn't to be underestimated."

"Certainly. It's quite the shock to learn that both the Second and Fifth Divisions have been destroyed though."

"Indeed. The young lad appears to have some rather talented individuals serving under him. Sigrún, who defeated Shiba, as well as the masked man who brought Homura to tears."

"Quite so. They're a lot stronger than any of our previous enemies." Vassarfall's words as he nodded in agreement were filled with conviction. Vassarfall had engaged Steel Clan forces on the battlefield, and even during the recent pursuit, he had suffered a fair number of losses himself. He knew the Steel Clan's strength from personal experience.

"We've cornered them here, but it's precisely because they're cornered that they're going to fight back with tooth and claw. The lad is sure to have something we're not expecting tucked neatly up his sleeve. Be cautious as you approach."

"Heh, who do you think you're talking to?" Vassarfall responded with a predatory grin at Nobunaga's warning. His face had taken on the confidence of a man who had waded into countless dangerous battles and won victories in spite of the odds. That was, of course, to be expected. Each of the five Division commanders had their strengths: Ran was a balanced commander who combined combat finesse with intelligence; Shiba had been an offensive commander who specialized in heavy offense; Kuuga had been known for his steady, cautious ability to get things done; and Old Man Salk was regarded for the skills he had honed through his decades of experience. Given his skill set, Vassarfall was the man best suited to lead the vanguard.

While leading the vanguard in battle was considered one of the greatest honors for a warrior, it was also one of the most dangerous roles on the battlefield, rivaled only by the rear guard during a retreat. The vanguard always engaged first in any battle, meaning the enemy was still in their proper formations, were able to properly use their ranged weaponry, and were

prepared for their opponent's approach. The commander of the vanguard had to charge into the enemy at the peak of their readiness. It truly was a dangerous and terrifying duty.

Vassarfall had been assigned to serve in his armies' vanguards by Nobunaga in over twenty battles now, but despite the extreme danger of that role, he had survived every time. In fact, since he had joined Nobunaga as one of his subordinates, he had never once even been wounded in battle. His forces had encountered three ambushes by Hveðrungr's rear guard, but each time he had avoided the gunshots at the last moment and emerged unscathed. It should have been impossible, but it was all due to Vassarfall's extraordinary ability to detect danger, his ability to make decisions quickly, and his flexibility in response.

"Leave it to me. I shall go and lay bare all of the enemy's plans for you to see," Vassarfall stated proudly.

Nobunaga nodded, trusting Vassarfall to make good on his word. Vassarfall was perfectly suited to this task, in which the Flame Clan Army was walking into a completely unknown situation.

"Oh my! What a terrible thing! Is this all that is left of the beautiful Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr?! How unbelievable! Gods, how could you do such a cruel thing...?!"

The moment he stepped foot in Glaðsheimr, Vassarfall gazed up at the heavens and lamented melodramatically. It looked at a glance like a piece of excessive emotive theater, but Vassarfall meant every word. Vassarfall considered himself a follower of beauty and art rather than a warrior or a general. He had been born and raised in a village near Glaðsheimr, and he had made the trip to the Holy Capital countless times in his youth, always basking in the city's beauty.

When Nobunaga had taken power in the Flame Clan, all of the innovations and new items Nobunaga had produced made the Holy Capital feel old and behind the times, and Vassarfall had stopped visiting as a result, but the capital had still been a memorable place where Vassarfall had spent his adolescence.

Perhaps the bustling liveliness of the city and the grandeur of the palace and the Hliðskjálf had been exaggerated in his memory, but he still remembered it as a city filled with beauty in all its forms. To Vassarfall, the loss of that beauty was a loss for all humanity.

“People are indeed sinful creatures. Certainly, the people of Glaðsheimr had grown arrogant and had fallen from grace. But still! The culture they created is innocent! Surely the gods understand this, so why would they allow such... Oh!” Vassarfall paused mid-sentence as though he had been struck by a divine insight and began to tremble.

“I see! All things eventually pass! This fragility, too, is beauty! Wonderful! Brilliant! My emotions pour forth from my heart and out of my eyes! All of you! I have gained enlightenment! True beauty comes in fragility!” Vassarfall passionately described his discovery as tears streamed from his eyes, however...

“Right... I see...”

“Ah, you found something. Glad to hear it, sir.”

“Shouldn’t we get going?”

His subordinates all reacted without much interest. There wasn’t a single soldier among them who was shocked by Vassarfall’s behavior. They clearly didn’t care about what he was saying in the slightest. It was far from an appropriate attitude to take with one’s superior, but this was what passed for an ordinary interaction in the Third Division of the Flame Clan Army.

“Tch. All this time with me, and you savages still can’t grasp the value of beauty. I weep for my misfortune,” Vassarfall said with a look of frustration. That didn’t mean he wanted them to flatter him or try to humor him. That, too, was far from what Vassarfall would have liked. There was no point in them doing anything like that unless they truly understood his words, repented their past ignorance, and fully shared in his emotional revelation. He found any superficial agreement or flattery to be artless and lacking in elegance—a hollow façade concealing baser motives such as self-preservation and advancement. Vassarfall would much rather hear blunt honesty from his subordinates than taint his ears with such ugly words. That was all to say that, all in all, Vassarfall

was a bothersome individual who would grow upset the moment a subordinate tried to tactfully feign polite agreement like a civilized human being. He was an eccentric's eccentric. However...

"Come now, sir, let's go!"

"Please come back from your dreamland for now."

"Yes, please do. Our lives depend on it."

"Grr... All of you, you understand that I am the great Vassarfall, the fourth-ranking member of the Flame Clan, yes?! Surely you can stand to treat me with more respect!"

"Oh, c'mon, we respect you plenty."

"Yeah. I doubt there are children who admire their old man as much as we do."

"Quite so."

"Truly?! It doesn't appear that way to me!"

While he would mutter complaints with a pout, he made no effort to angrily chastise his disrespectful subordinates. The fact of the matter was, Vassarfall was a forgiving individual who would let most slights pass so long as the speaker was being honest, and while it took some getting used to, those under his command who had known him for a while actually had a pretty high opinion of him. The fact that they would say he was a good commander with the proviso that he was still weird was just a sign of their affection for their commander.

"So, how's it look, sir? Anything odd here?"

"Hrm... If anything, everything seems to be odd. The city's abandoned, the buildings have all collapsed. It's harder to find things that *aren't* odd."

Vassarfall looked around, letting out a sigh of exasperation before answering his subordinate's question and scratched at his cheek.

"Well, true, but surely you can find something unusual, right, old man?" a subordinate said casually, his complete trust in Vassarfall's observation skills reflected in his voice.

Vassarfall came from a historical family lineage of spies that had served the Holy Ásgarðr Empire for over two hundred years. Over those two hundred years—over the course of several generations—the family had developed and refined countless techniques and observation skills that were some of the most remarkable in Yggdrasil. Part of the reason that the empire, despite losing much of its military strength early in its history, had survived for two centuries was because of the sheer information gathering abilities of Vassarfall's family. That was why Vassarfall, despite not being an Einherjar and lacking any supernatural detection abilities like Homura, was so adept at detecting traps and the presence of people regardless of his environment.

Indeed, the family considered Vassarfall to be their greatest creation. Not simply the greatest creation of his generation, but of their entire two-hundred-year history. There had, of course, been several Einherjar born in the family over the generations; there had been at least ten of them over the last two centuries. Despite that, Vassarfall, a normal human being without a rune, was considered to be their greatest creation.

How had Vassarfall gained that level of skill? He himself would say it was because he had no talent whatsoever, and in fact, as a child, Vassarfall had nothing that particularly distinguished him from his peers. In whatever pursuit he tried, it was easier to find his name by counting from the bottom of any given list—he was a thoroughly sorry excuse for a student. Despite his lack of talent, however, he had persevered. He had taken the time to carefully and methodically learn each technique and skill. He continued to train and refine his skills, even as his peers mocked him for his slow progress and his insistence on mastering something fully before moving forward. He never gave up even when his teachers would ask him with exasperation why he didn't understand such a simple lesson. He continued to ask questions, thought for himself, developed theories in his own mind, and learned through trial and error.

He had grown at a much slower pace than the rest of his generation, but he never stopped learning and never stopped growing. After years and years of effort, his continued, unending growth meant he had overtaken those who had mocked him just years earlier. It was only when he finally understood he had nothing more to learn in his village that he had set out on a wandering journey

where he, through sheer chance, ran into Nobunaga. He saw beauty in Nobunaga's creation and Nobunaga's way of living, and Vassarfall had been completely smitten by the pursuit of beauty and elegance. That was how he had arrived in his current position.

"Hmm, it doesn't seem like there's much in the way of traps for the moment. Based on the ripples in the air, there's a fair number of people in that direction. I feel someone is watching us. I can't say exactly where it's coming from, but it's not a pleasant feeling," Vassarfall stated, skillfully listing off the things he had noticed so far.

"Wow..."

His subordinates all let out a gasp of admiration at once. It was understandable. Even after Vassarfall's explanation, they couldn't feel what it was he felt. Vassarfall let out a confident little snort.

"I see you're making that same strange face you always do when you get into your groove."

"Hey, don't be making too much fun of it. Sure, it does look really weird, but that's what's kept us alive all this time."

"I mean, you're right, but we're about to fight, yet there's not a trace of concern in his expression. It kind of sucks the tension out of the air. I wish he'd do something about that odd look of his."

The men made comments at Vassarfall's expense—though they meant no harm.

"Ugh... Surely there are other things you ought to notice," Vassarfall responded and gritted his teeth in frustration as his subordinates focused solely on the surface details that they could see. Who cared about his strange facial expressions? It was such a trivial thing to worry about. True, it did look like he was just staring open-mouthed like a gaping idiot. But to Vassarfall, this was the final form of all of the techniques that his family had developed over generations. It was his belief that people saw not with their eyes, but with their minds.

This had nothing to do with the cliché about a mind's eye providing

supernatural insights or the like, but rather, Vassarfall believed that it was only by “closing” the mind’s eye that one could truly sense the world around them. People filter the input from their senses through their preconceptions. When told there were ghosts, people would see faces in tree bark or silhouettes in waving grass. Much to the same effect, if they were told there was a trap at a particular place, they would start seeing traps even if they didn’t exist. Conversely, if they were convinced there were no traps, they’d miss them even if they were obvious to the naked eye.

It was for these reasons that Vassarfall cleared his mind of all thoughts. By emptying his mind of any preconceived notions or considerations, he was able to perceive the world as it truly was without filtering it through his own mental schema. It was, in fact, a rather impressive feat, but...

“It’s okay, Father. I’m listening to what you’re saying.”

About the only one among his subordinates who understood the logic even in the slightest was his Second.

“Sniff... Fluss, you’re a good man.”

“Yes, I completely agree,” the man named Fluss said with a dry laugh. Among Vassarfall’s group’s leadership, there were quite a few outspoken and blunt individuals. Phrased positively, they had nothing to hide, and they were all easy people to read, but because of those previously mentioned qualities, they weren’t exactly the most harmonious group to lead. Vassarfall, their sworn father, was, above all, a man who valued living life on his own terms and tended to reside in a world of his own making. The man who somehow kept all of these individuals together as a cohesive unit was Fluss, his Second. There was no doubt that without him, Vassarfall’s entire group would have disintegrated long before this point. Fluss often had to tell himself he was a good man in order to deal with the stress of herding what was essentially a giant group of cats.

“For the moment, I suppose it’s safe to assume, given you’re picking up on a lot of people in that direction, that it likely means their main body is holed up in Valaskjálf Palace, correct?”

“That would be astute, yes.”

“In that case, if there are no traps around, then we may as well keep moving

forward.”

“Right. Hm?”

Just as he nodded in agreement at Fluss’s words, Vassarfall suddenly furrowed his brow.

“What is it?”

“Seems like the enemy’s started moving. They’ve got soldiers hiding around here. They’re close.”

“I still don’t know how you do it. Something about the ground whispering to you, right?”

“Yeah. If it’s just a few dozen, I can’t detect them, but at several hundred, it’s impossible to miss the vibrations from their movements that come through the ground.”

“No, I’m pretty sure most people would miss it if the enemy was earnestly trying to stay quiet. You’re about the only person who can reliably detect it.”

“With enough training, anyone can do it. Even a failure like me managed to figure out how to do it.”

“Ordinarily, just training isn’t enough.”

“Well, all that means is that the volume and quality of the training are severely lacking. Anyone can learn these skills if they cut back on sleep, work so hard at it that they piss blood, and in the worst case, live blindfolded for five years.”

It was reasonably well-established that the remaining four senses of a blind person were much sharper than that of a sighted person. Many blind people learned to navigate by rapping a stick against the ground and listening to how the sounds reflect to map out their position. What was especially impressive was that those people weren’t Einherjar or particularly gifted in any other way. They were simply normal people besides the fact that they couldn’t see. If they could do it, then with enough training, anyone should be able to do the same thing. Now, whether or not that was actually true was something only the gods knew, but Vassarfall, at least, was convinced of it. After all, he, who had no

amount of talent to speak of, had learned how to do it.

“...I really do sympathize with the enemy needing to deal with a freak like you.”

“That’s rather mean, you know!” Vassarfall shouted indignantly when his Second, the man he trusted without reservation, couldn’t help but describe him as a freak. Listening to their exchange, the other subordinates burst out in laughter. There wasn’t a trace of tension among them, even as they approached the battlefield, but that was a sign of their trust in Vassarfall and their familiarity with battle. Despite their seemingly clownish behavior, the Third Division of the Flame Clan Army was a unit that had little in the way of openings or weaknesses.

“So, the enemy’s vanguard is led by Vassarfall the Spearhead, it seems? About what I expected,” Yuuto observed coolly as he listened to Kristina give her report.

Although the Flame Clan Army had finally started their advance, his heart was strangely calm. All the anxiety and the tension from before the battle felt like a distant memory. Despite still being rather young, Yuuto had plentiful experience leading men in battle. Over the years, he had drilled himself to stay humble and remain calm when commanding. The conditioning from all the years of leading his armies had developed into a Pavlovian response within him, and when his mind detected that a battle was about to start, he automatically switched over to battle mode. Felicia looked over at him with a glance that seemed to say, “See, what did I tell you?”

“Because he’s never been wounded despite continually commanding his army’s vanguard, he’s come to be known as the Fafnir, the unkillable imp.”

Felicia’s description of their opponent sent a shocked murmur through the assembled commanders. It was difficult for them to believe that anyone commanding the vanguard from the front lines rather than simply leading from the safety of the rear had never suffered a single wound in battle. They could only think of a single example of anyone ever managing that feat.

“...Surely he’s not some monster on the level of Steinþórr, right?” Haugspori,

one of the Horn Clan's Brísingamen, voiced what everyone in the room was wondering. As a core member of the Horn Clan Army, he had faced Steinþórr on the battlefield several times, and he knew from personal experience just how frightening an opponent he had been. In fact, those experiences were a form of trauma for him, and he couldn't help but worry there was another Steinþórr out there, ready to rampage across the battlefield.

"That can't be it. From the information Kristina gathered beforehand, he's got an extremely good reputation as a general, but his personal skill in battle isn't much to write home about. Hence he's known as Fafnir, the imp, rather than something more grandiose. I'm told he doesn't even have a rune."

Yuuto quickly shot down that speculation, but the revelation that Vassarfall wasn't an Einherjar sent another murmur through the assembled commanders. The fact that he had no rune made his ability to come out unscathed despite leading the vanguard all the more difficult to comprehend.

"I see... Still, not only do we have to cope with Nobunaga, but they have other monsters like Shiba, Kuuga, and Homura. Most clans have, at most, a single such person, but the Flame Clan seems to be stacked with them," Haugspori replied.

"Yeah. It's a bit tiresome to see them send these ridiculous opponents after us one after the other. That being said, it's not as though we don't have comparable people in our own ranks. Speaking of which... Fagrahvél!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Fagrahvél stepped forward when her name was called. She was the patriarch of the Sword Clan who had once commanded the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance, and she possessed an extraordinarily potent rune that was nicknamed the Rune of Kings.

"You're up. Activate your Gjallarhorn."

"A-Already, Your Majesty?"

It appeared she had expected to be given some sort of task after being addressed, but this order seemed to have caught her off guard, and she blinked in her eyes in surprise.

“...Father, my rune’s ability is certainly powerful, but I’m not capable of using it in rapid succession. The battle hasn’t started yet. I humbly suggest it may be best to wait to see how the battle develops.”

Fagrahvél hesitantly argued against Yuuto’s order. Her power was extremely draining, to the point that after the Battle of Vígríðr, she had been so exhausted that she couldn’t even walk for several days afterward. Once activated, she wouldn’t be able to use it for at least another three days. It was a powerful rune, but the fact that it could only be used once every three days made the timing of using it difficult.

“Very well. When it comes to Gjallarhorn, you know how to use it better than anyone. Continue. I want your honest opinion.”

The fate of the Steel Clan rested on this battle. Yuuto was aware that he wasn’t perfect. He wanted to make sure he wasn’t missing anything. He had asked his subordinates to give him their honest opinions, rather than hold back from a sense of duty or respect for his rank. He needed their frank assessments of his tactics in order to succeed here.

“Of course, Your Majesty. In my experience to date, my rune is best employed in a short, decisive battle. I believe it is most effective when you wish to break a stalemate or prevent your forces from collapsing when on the defensive. The battle has just started. We don’t know how the enemy will fight, and we have no idea of what awaits us as the battle unfolds. Making use of it now will mean we won’t have it if it’s needed later.”

“I see, you have a point there. But isn’t now the time to use it?”

“Pardon?”

Fagrahvél blinked at Yuuto’s question. She didn’t quite grasp what he meant.

“You just said it. That it was best to prevent the army from collapsing when on the defensive. Isn’t now exactly that moment?”

“Y-Yes, I did say that... However, using it at the very beginning of a battle is still...”

Fagrahvél furrowed her brow, still skeptical about the merits of Yuuto’s proposal. Gjallarhorn was her greatest asset. She was probably reluctant to use

it as an opening move. However, though she considered it her only trump card, to Yuuto it was but one of the aces he had up his sleeve. Yuuto always made certain to have multiple cards that he could play at any one time, and now was the right time to play this particular card.

“It may be the start of the battle, but I think now is the emergency that requires your rune. If we show even the slightest signs of weakness in the opening battle, we have no chance of victory. We need to win decisively.”

“Ah?! Decisively, you say?!”

Fagrahvél swallowed audibly at Yuuto’s statement. The opponent they faced was a famously skilled general, one who was such a good tactician that he had never been wounded in battle. Claiming a decisive victory against such an opponent felt like reaching for and trying to grasp the clouds.

“Yes. Most of the soldiers haven’t recovered from the shock of our recent losses. We’ve lost two battles in a row. If the enemy gains any sort of advantage, our lines may very well collapse.”

“...That is true. I, too, was somewhat concerned about that.”

Fagrahvél nodded with a troubled expression. She herself was a skilled general, one who had previously been chosen to lead the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance. She had instinctively felt that the morale of the current Steel Clan Army was teetering on the brink of disaster.

“If we’re to overcome those losses, then simply staying on the defensive and forcing the enemy to retreat won’t be good enough. We need to crush the opposition and show our people that the enemy can be beaten,” Yuuto explained.

“Hrm, I see...” Fagrahvél tilted her head thoughtfully in response. She wasn’t yet fully convinced of his argument, but it seemed she saw the logic behind his proposal. “Isn’t that too much of a gamble though? At the very least, we should wait to see how the enemy...”

“Fagrahvél, I don’t gamble in battle,” Yuuto replied confidently.

At first, it seemed Fagrahvél wasn’t certain what Yuuto was trying to say, but once his meaning dawned upon her, she asked him with a tremor in her voice.

“Pardon? Y-You don’t mean to say that you’re certain you can win?!”

“That’s exactly what I’m suggesting. Okay, I won’t say it’s a foregone conclusion, but we *can* win this—so long as you lend me your strength,” Yuuto answered casually.

“Th-The enemy is a general with multiple nicknames, isn’t he...?” Fagrahvél asked, her body trembling. She knew from her experiences over the past year that Yuuto wasn’t someone who would lie about those kinds of things. Even so, she still needed to ask.

“Well, I won’t say we can win anywhere at any time. But here, now, and for the initial battle? I’m almost certain that we will,” Yuuto declared coolly. He wasn’t saying it out of a need to convince himself it was true, nor was he saying it to put up a strong front to his commander; his tone was casual, as though he were telling them that the sky was blue. Yes, there was no way he would lose. As for why...

“This is my backyard, after all,” Yuuto quipped.

“Hm, seems the enemy’s planning a pincer to take out our flanks,” Vassarfall suddenly stopped in his tracks and said as though the topic were of no concern to him.

Currently, the Flame Clan Army’s Third Division under his command was advancing along the great road leading from the southern gate to Valaskjálf Palace. While the enemy shadowing them appeared to think they were well concealed by the buildings lining the street, they weren’t able to hide the sound of their breathing. Had it been like the rear guard during the recent retreat that had quieted their breathing and dispersed in small groups, he might not have heard them, but Vassarfall’s ears could easily pick up the sound of several hundred in a group moving through the city.

“An ambush, eh? Seems like the right call to make,” Fluss the Second said calmly as he assessed the enemy’s choice of tactics. It went without saying that ambushes only worked because the targets were unaware of their attackers. When the targets knew where the ambushers were, like in this instance, they presented no threat at all. It was simple for him to remain calm despite knowing

there were enemy soldiers in the vicinity.

“One, two, three, four... I’d wager there are about six units. Each one numbers a few hundred. None of them are over five hundred.”

“...To be able to detect details to that level really is close to supernatural, boss. Not that it’s anything new,” Fluss replied and let out a dry laugh of exasperation.

“You use the fact that sound bounces off surfaces. It’s pretty easy to take advantage of when you get used to it.”

“The whole thing about sound bouncing around is what doesn’t make sense.”

“What? You know how there are echoes when you shout out at mountains? Your voice comes back from the mountain, right?”

“Huh? Isn’t that just the trickster god Loki playing tricks?” Fluss asked, clearly confused by Vassarfall’s question.

“Even gods aren’t that bored.”

It was Vassarfall’s turn to be exasperated. His worldly knowledge was so great to the point that he looked like the weird one. Even his Second, who was one of the smarter men under his command, could only comprehend so much. It was completely unfair.

“Well, anyway, I have to say I feel bad for our enemies. They’ve been chased back to this ruin, and I’m sure they were betting on this plan being the way to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. And the poor bastards have run into someone who so thoroughly ignores the natural way of things,” his Second, Fluss, replied.

“Everything I do follows the laws of nature,” Vassarfall returned with a sour frown. He had long since given up on having ordinary people understand the mechanics behind his exceptional skills. He’d resigned himself to the fact that the world wasn’t willing to listen to the truth.

“So, what do we do? Should we ambush the ambushers? Or should we play along and draw them out?”

Vassarfall looked over at his Second as he pondered his response. When it

came to purely tactical knowledge, Fluss had a fair amount of promise. He'd likely studied the subject in great detail. Vassarfall would have no complaints if the guy would just go a step further and try to understand how the world worked or develop a better appreciation of true beauty.

"The former. We'll split our forces into ten units and hit them all at once," Vassarfall responded.

"Ten?! Isn't that spreading ourselves a bit too thin?!" Fluss furrowed his brow skeptically. Numbers represented strength when it came to battle. Dividing one's forces simply invited the enemy to destroy those divided forces with greater ease.

"Not a concern. Glaðsheimr is so densely packed with buildings that it's hard to deploy a large army. The fighting will probably take place in narrow spaces like alleys. Leaving our forces concentrated would just mean that most would end up standing around twiddling their thumbs."

"Right... I see..."

Fluss nodded in understanding. He knew full well that keeping one's forces concentrated was a fairly elementary and logical tactical decision to take, but there was no point doing so if most of the soldiers would be left unable to engage the enemy. The correct concentration of a general's forces meant that all of the available soldiers in a given unit were engaged in battle rather than sitting idle. In that sense, splitting up the division's forces made plenty of sense.

"I'm told the Steel Clan Army totals about thirty thousand, but there's only a few thousand deployed in this area. There's not even ten thousand of them here. They've probably divided their forces into four groups to counter our encirclement of the city. The Great Lord has provided me with twenty thousand soldiers. It'd be a waste not to make use of our numerical superiority," Vassarfall explained.

"Ah ha."

"Even when split into ten units, that's still two thousand men per unit. Each unit is far bigger than the enemy they'll be facing. We then spread them out around the city and trap the enemy units in pincer attacks."

“Understood. Then I’ll go ahead and give the orders.”

Fluss quickly began issuing orders to his subordinates based on the information provided by Vassarfall. In this regard, Fluss was attentive to details and extremely capable. It didn’t take him more than a few minutes to make the necessary preparations and return to Vassarfall’s side.

“Ready when you are, Old Man.”

“Good. The enemy’s position is as I’ve noted. Get out there and deal with them!”

“Yes, My Lord!” Vassarfall’s subordinates replied in unison, their expressions set in determination, lacking any of the playfulness they had shown earlier. They were all first-rate warriors—they knew when to relax and when to put the entirety of their focus on fighting. That was the principle that guided the Flame Clan’s Third Division.

“The enemy’s dispersed. Based on their movements, they’re completely aware of where all of our units are hiding!”

“All of them?!”

Yuuto blinked in surprise at Kristina’s report. A city, with its countless obstacles and buildings, was a perfect area to hide soldiers. He had expected the enemy to be on guard for ambushes, but it was rather surprising to learn they had worked out where his units were hiding.

“Do we have a mole? That seems pretty unlikely...”

About the only ones who knew where all of the Steel Clan forces were positioned at the moment were him and Kristina, who was watching the entire battlefield from the Hliðskjálf ruins with a pair of binoculars. As far as the officers were concerned, each was only aware of the position of their own units—they had no idea where the rest of the army was positioned. A spy wouldn’t explain why the enemy knew where all of the units near the Flame Clan Army’s Third Division forces were located.

“Guess that Homura girl that Hveðrungr mentioned is with the army. That, or Vassarfall’s got someone with similar abilities in his ranks. Eesh, so many cheat

abilities...”

He didn’t really have any right to complain, given that his own twin runes conferred similar abilities. Of course, Yuuto’s words were simply banter, and he wasn’t actually complaining about the enemy’s ability to ferret out his hidden units. This was all still within expectations.

“Kris, tell me the enemy’s positions.”

“To the west: eighty-seven by forty-four, moving west. Eighty-six by forty-five moving to eighty-five, shifting westward. Eighty-eight by forty-five is also heading westward. To the east...”

Kristina quickly read out a series of numbers to him via her handheld radio. While it sounded like code, it wasn’t anything quite so complex. They had simply divided Glaðsheimr into a one hundred by one hundred grid, and Kristina was reporting the locations based on the coordinates on that grid. It was similar to how chess moves were recorded using grid coordinates.



“Good, then it’s our turn to move. Seven-seven, go from eighty-seven by forty-two to forty-one. Seven-eight, hold your position. Seven-nine...”

Yuuto used the information provided by Kristina to issue orders to his units by radio, giving them precise information in real-time. The fact that Yuuto was so adeptly maneuvering several dispersed units simultaneously was a massively overpowered cheat ability given the current era. And that wasn’t the only thing he had on his side. He had the advantage of knowing the terrain. Yuuto curled his lips into a malicious grin.

“Time for the Flame Clan Army to feel what it’s like to fight in an urban jungle.”

“Enemy sighted ahead! It’s just like the Old Man said!”

“Right. Let us pursue them. The path ahead of us is pretty narrow. You lot go around and hit them from the side!”

“Got it!”

The Flame Clan Army’s Third Division ran through the streets of Glaðsheimr, calling out to one another as they advanced. They made certain to coordinate their movements, approaching the enemy from the front and either side, robbing them of their escape routes. The Steel Clan troops were practically cornered rats at this point.

“What? They’re not going to run any further? Very well! Attack!”

“Raaaah!”

Battles broke out all over the southern part of Glaðsheimr.

“Push, push! Ah?!”

“Grr, they’re strong!”

“Dammit, there are Einherjar here?!”

The exclamations of surprise came from the Flame Clan Army’s soldiers. Expecting the hardest fighting to be in the southern quadrant of the city, the Steel Clan had assigned the elite Einherjar of the Sword Clan’s Maidens of the

Waves to that area. Had they been fighting in a wide-open space, it would have been possible for the Flame Clan forces to overwhelm them with numbers, but all of the fighting was taking place in narrow alleys that limited the number of soldiers that could engage the Maidens at any one time.

With their superhuman fighting abilities, the Maidens dominated the battlefield. Just as importantly, they were currently fighting to the fullest of their potential thanks to the power of their patriarch's rune, Gjallarhorn. Despite the fact that the Flame Clan soldiers fighting against them were professional and elite soldiers, the Maidens were far too much for a handful of ordinary human beings to handle.

"Ugh! Blast! Where are our reinforcements?!"

"Just what in the hell are the others doing?!"

The soldiers began to grumble as the reinforcements that were supposed to flank the enemy from the sides didn't arrive. Just how long had they been waiting? Why weren't they here?

As for what had happened to the Flame Clan soldiers who had been sent to flank the enemy...

"Tch, the rubble's blocking this alley."

"Dammit! This way, then!"

They had been forced to take further detours. As they wandered through the various alleys seeking a way forward, arrows rained down on them from above.

"Gah!"

"Ack!"

"Blast! They're hitting us from above!"

They glared up at the Steel Clan archers that had suddenly appeared on the rooftops around them and roared out in rage. Even as they prepared to respond with their own arrows...

"They're already gone!"

"Bastards ran away."

The Steel Clan soldiers quickly abandoned the advantage of their high ground and vanished.

“After them! After them!”

The enraged Flame Clan soldiers gave chase, but quickly lost sight of their attackers in the maze-like alleys.

“How in the blazes did they get behind us?!”

“Why are we the ones getting hit on both sides?!”

As the Flame Clan forces chased the Steel Clan forces conducting hit-and-run attacks, they found themselves surrounded by units who had been positioned to encircle them according to Yuuto’s instructions.

“Dammit, you’re too late!”

Even when reinforcements finally arrived to relieve a Flame Clan unit, the Steel Clan soldiers had already retreated and vanished without a trace. The Flame Clan forces that gave chase quickly got lost in the warren of side paths, losing sight of the enemy and falling victim to ambushes and pincer movements. The process repeated itself across the southern quadrant of the city.

“Tch... At this rate, we’re just going to get slaughtered. We need to get back to Father Vassarfall and get new orders.”

“Yeah. Our role is to discover the enemy’s plans after all.”

“We’ve already accomplished that goal. Let’s get out of here.”

After four hours of fighting, the unit commanders finally understood the extent of the enemy’s preparations and ordered a retreat. However...

“Blast it. Where are we?!”

“Why isn’t Father here?!”

“Ah! He’s *that* far away?!”

Because they had been forced to chase after the Steel Clan’s various units along the back alleys of Glaðsheimr, they had completely lost track of their own position. Their sense of direction was practically shot, too. With several of the

Third Division units isolated from the main body of the Flame Clan Third Division, what would come next was all too predictable...

“Get them!”

“The enemy’s isolated!”

“Surround them and destroy them!”

“Raaaah!”

The Steel Clan Army poured out of the ruins to attack them. They seemed to know every corner of the city intimately, easily navigating the maze of side streets and alleyways. They also appeared to know precisely where the Flame Clan soldiers were, closing off any escape routes with terrifying accuracy and attacking them mercilessly. Despite supposedly being outnumbered, the Steel Clan soldiers were the ones encircling and destroying the Flame Clan forces.

It made no sense. The Flame Clan soldiers didn’t know where they were. They didn’t know how to get back to their force’s main body. They were isolated from the other Division units. They had no way of knowing when the enemy would appear, and there was no sign of reinforcements. This combination of factors quickly wore down even the most hardened soldiers of the Flame Clan and pushed them into a state of panic.

“They’ve taken down the enemy squad commander.”

“The enemy is moving to eighty-two by thirty-three.”

“Seven-seven here, we’ve finished moving to seventy-three by thirty-nine. Requesting additional orders.”

Yuuto moved the small stones on the map of Glaðsheimr in front of him as reports filtered through from the radio receiver. The white stones represented his own units, while black stones represented the enemy’s. The map, however, was only there for him to confirm the positions of each unit, and didn’t provide enough information on its own to allow Yuuto to grasp the movement of each piece on the board. Instead, he memorized the board and simulated the next move in his mind, manipulating the pieces into the positions he desired. The sheer skill behind his calculations was enough to leave Hveðrungr and Bára

slack-jawed in shock as they watched from beside him.

Both of them were among the most skilled tacticians in all of Yggdrasil. They were also extremely intelligent. They understood human psychology, and they had the necessary skills to draw their opponents into their traps. But even the two of them wouldn't be able to do what Yuuto was doing.

Sure, they might be able to do it on a small scale, moving their own units to draw out the enemy and give precise directions to catch them in a pincer movement. What Yuuto was doing was totally different—he was commanding several dozen units with unerring precision. This was the power of one of Yuuto's twin runes, Herfjötur, Fetter of the Host. Currently, Yuuto knew the position of every soldier on the battlefield, regardless of whether they were friend or foe.

Of course, this wasn't entirely due to the power of his rune. He was only able to direct this elaborate dance because he had completely memorized the terrain of Glaðsheimr itself. Yuuto hadn't been a king that had simply sat on his throne and waited for reports from below. He knew that he needed to see the city for himself to get an accurate grasp of its welfare. That was why he had often gone into the city in disguise with Kristina accompanying him to hide his presence using the power of her rune. He had extensively traveled every part of the city, focusing more on the backstreets and alleys rather than on the main thoroughfares. He did so because, in those places, there was far more information about the city and the problems that it shouldered than anywhere else.

Without that sort of personal experience, he wouldn't have been able to so accurately recall every corner of his city. It was precisely because he had walked down every back alley that he was able to make use of them as a part of his arsenal. With that knowledge, he had then chosen to conduct insurgency-style guerrilla attacks on the invading army, miring them in urban combat—a style of warfare that, in the modern day, had nearly brought the US Army to its knees. It was a tactic that the perfect combination of his abilities, his knowledge of the city, and the location of Glaðsheimr made possible.

“Well, they got us. I thought we'd seen through their planned ambushes, but

we'd only ended up getting dragged into a much nastier trap they had laid."

Vassarfall pursed his lips bitterly as he listened to the report given by an officer who had, through sheer luck, managed to return alive from the warren of ambushes and traps that his forces had wandered into. It was pointless to know where the enemy was positioned if they didn't know how to reach them. While Glaðsheimr appeared tidy and organized near its main arteries, it was another matter entirely when one moved away from the once-glittering main streets. The countless unplanned and random new constructions and renovations that had taken place around the various backstreets and alleys over the city's two-hundred-year history had created a jumbled web of passages that the recent earthquake, and the rubble it left in its wake, had made all the much worse. The backstreets of Glaðsheimr were now effectively a labyrinth.

"Just how are they doing it, though?!"

Vassarfall understood that a ruler who cared intensely about his people might know the layout of the city itself. Grasping the location of his forces was also possible if the enemy had someone like himself or Homura among their ranks, or if they had an observer watching from a suitable vantage point. The question, however, was how he was getting that information to his soldiers.

Vassarfall had detected at least fifteen additional enemy units in the area, likely reinforcements that had come from other sectors of the city. They were all actively moving around the city. It was inconceivable that the enemy's commander could give such precise orders to that many troops. In that case, had the enemy units been given their orders ahead of time? No, that was impossible; it would rob the units of the necessary tactical flexibility. It was clear to him that the enemy commander wasn't just issuing broad orders, but giving precise instructions based on the movements of his own forces.

"Well, I give up," Vassarfall said with a sigh, then held up both hands and shrugged. Continuing the battle was exactly what the enemy wanted. It would just waste the precious lives of his own soldiers. "At least we know what the enemy's planning. We're pulling back! Sound the retreat!"

Vassarfall gave the order without a moment's hesitation, and his forces began their retreat. The enemy had the upper hand from the very first exchange, and

he had achieved nothing of note. It had been a completely lopsided loss on his part. Had he been an average general, he would have dug in his heels and kept on fighting, trying to save face or at least salvage something out of this disaster. Vassarfall himself had the Glass Goblet crafted by the great artisan Ingrid on the line. The recognition that he had no choice but to retreat was agonizing. However, he had no intention of letting his personal feelings cloud his judgment. This sound decision-making was precisely why he was worthy of being known by the moniker of Vassarfall, Master of Advance and Retreat.

“Sieg lárn! Sieg lárn!”

Just as the sun reached its zenith, the cheers of the victorious Steel Clan forces rang out, chasing the retreating Flame Clan forces out of the city. The Steel Clan Army had achieved an overwhelming victory in this initial engagement, regaining its morale as it prepared to counterattack. But to Nobunaga, this initial engagement had simply been a means of seeing how his enemy planned to fight. The true battle had yet to begin.

To be continued...

Afterword

Hello, it's been a while. Takayama here. This might seem a bit sudden, but I have a confession to make... Lately, I've been jerking it. I'm forty-two, and I know it's a bit odd for someone of my age to do something like that, but at times, I'm finding myself jerking it morning, day, and night.

I've been feeling a lot better since I started jerking it. The hip pain and the back pain that's been bothering me for years is gone, and my shoulders feel lighter. It's all thanks to jerking it. I hope that my readers will also jerk their hips like sumo wrestlers stomping on the ground. It's a great way to lose weight, reduce stress, and help relieve back and hip pain.

Now, as for the story... It hasn't ended yet. That's odd, I suppose. The plan was to put an end to the fighting during the last volume. Despite that, the fighting still rages on. My estimates have been quite off, apparently. But, well, at the very least, by the end of the next volume, it might reach a certain climax?

Anyway, now that I'm done padding the necessary number of pages, let me get on with my usual acknowledgments.

To my editor, thank you for working with me through the Obon break. I truly appreciate the fact that you were willing to put up with me even during the holidays.

Yukisan-sensei, thank you so much for the beautiful illustrations as usual!

A sincere thanks also goes out to everyone who was involved with the completion of this book.

And finally, a heartfelt thank-you to every one of you readers who decided to pick up this volume!

This story is finally nearing its climax, and it'll keep getting more intense from here, so please follow along on this journey until the end! I hope that we meet again in the next volume.

Bonus Short Story

The Wolf Girl's Dream

"Mother Rún! Mother Rún! Please respond if you can hear me!" Hildegard shouted out at the top of her lungs as she brought her horse to a stop. Her throat was aching from the strain of her prolonged yelling. No matter how long she waited, however, there was no reply. Hildegard's nose twitched as she sniffed the air, but there was no trace of Sigrún's scent.

"Not here, either..." Hildegard murmured, her voice quivering as she struggled to contain her panic. It had been nearly an hour since Sigrún, her mentor, had been swept away by the flooding Körmt River. The entire Múspell Unit was currently out searching for Sigrún, but Hildegard had yet to receive word that any of them had found her.

"Could she already be..." Hildegard felt a chill run down her spine as her mind wandered to the possibility that Sigrún had been wholly engulfed by the flooding waters and was dead.

"No, she's alive! Mother Rún *has* to be alive!" Hildegard shook her head violently from side to side, driving that possibility from her mind, and shouted as though to convince herself of the fact. "I'll never forgive her if she leaves for Valhalla before I can beat her!"

While Hildegard had beaten Sigrún in sparring matches when she held back or was using her off-hand, Hildegard had yet to defeat Sigrún in a straight up clash of skill. Sigrún was still easily able to beat her when she wanted to do so. That said, Hildegard had no intention of letting that remain the case. She had sworn someday she would beat Sigrún so decisively that the outcome could not possibly be refuted.

Though it may have appeared so, Hildegard didn't actually resent Sigrún. Well, perhaps a small amount of resentment existed, but that wasn't what motivated her toward her goal. Okay, if she was being totally honest, there was

a part of her that wanted to repay all the beatings she'd received in their previous matches with interest. In fact, a really big part of her that wanted to do exactly that, but that wasn't the reason she wanted to overcome her mentor. It was, at most, a tiny part of her motivation.

If anything, Hildegard wanted to beat Sigrún as a gesture of appreciation. That was because Sigrún had once told her that a master's greatest joy was to be surpassed by her student, and Hildegard, out of all of Sigrún's students, was likely the sole person capable of accomplishing that feat.

"You've really grown, Hilda." While Hildegard had heard Sigrún say those exact words as her superior, she wanted them directed at her as Sigrún's equal, which was why she couldn't possibly allow her to die here.

"Mother Rún! Where are you?!" Hildegard spurred her horse as she continued shouting, swearing to herself she would find Sigrún no matter what.









Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Character Introduction](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[ACT 1](#)

[ACT 2](#)

[ACT 3](#)

[ACT 4](#)

[ACT 5](#)

[ACT 6](#)

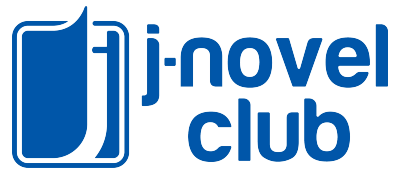
[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[Bonus Textless Images](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 19

by Seiichi Takayama

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